Spring in His Step (English Version)

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by Alice_in_Babylon

Summary

After surviving a revolution that wiped out royalty, Hannibal Lecter became the undisputed leader of the Kingdom of Boreas. He is more than just a king, he is an emperor. The new imperial house of Lecter needs an heir that Bedelia, the Beta wife of the Alpha Emperor, cannot provide. Hannibal must find a new consort, an Omega this time, to be sure he can get that long-desired heir.

Will Graham is the Omega son of a disgraced bourgeois. A native of the Kingdom of Boreas, he spent most of his life in the neighboring kingdom of Zephyr. But when Will's father sees an opportunity to save his family from ruin, they embark on a journey back to Boreas, where he will meet a certain emperor.

Notes

I couldn't help but notice that almost every fandom has at least one Regency Era fanfic (Jane Austen's influence, I'm sure) but I've never seen one based on the Napoleonic Era. This fic is inspired by that, with Hannibal being a sort of Napoleon and Will being a mix between Joséphine Bonaparte (Napoleon's first wife), Marie-Louise of Austria (Napoleon's second wife), and Marie Walewska (Napoleon's mistress). However, the story takes place on a fictional continent, with the names inspired by the Anemoi (the wind gods of Greek mythology) and the French Republican calendar.

This is an English translation of a work originally written in Spanish. I apologize for any mistake. The work is complete, but I'll post the chapters as I translate them.

Also, this was my first Omegaverse ever, so I only explored the dynamic a little.

Hope you like it.

- A translation of Spring in His Step by Alice_in_Babylon

Prologue

Hannibal and his sister sat in front of the fireplace in the cabin. The winters in the Frimaire area were intense and they did their best to keep warm while the adults talked in the kitchen. They had arrived at this cabin a few days ago to escape the violence that had taken over the kingdom.

Their parents avoided the subject when Hannibal and Mischa were around, but Hannibal had managed to overhear some of their conversations. “Secret police,” “purge,” “executions,” and “exile” were words that were repeated over and over again. Mischa often asked when they would return home. They had left their toys behind and it was also freezing, unlike in the castle that was their home, and the fireplaces there were much bigger than here. His mother told him they would go home soon, but Hannibal knew they probably would never return. His father had talked about fleeing to Notus, the southernmost country on the continent.

Little Hannibal was thinking about what it would be like to live in Notus when he heard a violent bang on the door, knocking it down. It was a group of men, aggressive alphas, dressed in clothes that looked more rags than anything else, holding bayonets and rifles.

"Citizen Lecter!" one of them shouted. "Come out at once! The new government of the people has tried you and found you guilty of profiting while the people starve."

Their mother ran to them as soon as the men entered and stood before Hannibal and Mischa as if she could protect them from the rifles with her body.

“I can assure you, gentlemen,“ Hannibal's father said, “I have never allowed the people in my lands to go hungry.”

“Silence!” snapped the man who seemed to be the leader. “Your castle had full cupboards while most people don't have money to buy bread. Aristocrats like you and your family are like a plague of leeches and the people's government will get rid of you.

He turned to the other men following him.

“Take Citizen Lecter outside,” he ordered. “The woman and the children can stay.”

Hannibal's mother and Mischa burst into tears as the men roughly pulled their father out. He offered no resistance. It was useless. Their mother hugged them tightly, still crying.

The sound of gunshots came from outside.

Chapter One

More than twenty years later...

“I can't accept this, Hannibal!” Bedelia cried, outraged. “My family's fortune brought you to where you are now.”

“And you will be fairly rewarded for it, Bedelia,” Hannibal replied with an exhausted sigh.

“Fairly? What's fair about this?” she asked. “We've been married for ten years and now that you've declared yourself emperor, you deny me my rightful title and repudiate me! You ask for a divorce!”

“Bedelia, I have explained this to you many times,” Hannibal continued, getting tired of repeating himself. “Just like our marriage, the divorce will be for purely political reasons. Don't you remember what happened to the royal family? When they were put to death, their house ceased to exist. The king was an only child and he and the queen only had one son. We have not been able to conceive in ten years of marriage. If I die without an heir of my own, my house could end and all my work would have been in vain.”

“Your sister is your heir,” Bedelia retorted.

“She is for the moment, but Mischa has no desire to rule. Besides, she won’t be accepted as an empress because she is an Omega. Having a child is important for me and the Empire, it will give stability to this new government. Accept the divorce and you will become a rich woman. You will be able to live the rest of your life in luxury and I will grant you an important title, but not that of the empress and my wife.”

"I'm not going to accept those scraps," Bedelia spat.

“You will,” Hannibal replied, standing up. He did not raise his voice, but his tone was cold. “You will do it because I say so. I am the Emperor now, and my word is law.”

Bedelia's fighting spirit had disappeared at the furious scent of an Alpha like Hannibal. Betas, like Bedelia, were much less sensitive to the pheromones and scents of Alphas and Omegas, but Hannibal was a powerful Alpha.

“Get out, Bedelia,” Hannibal commanded.

Bedelia turned around and walked out of the office without saying another word.

Hannibal sighed once more and slumped back into his desk chair. That was precisely the problem. Hannibal was an Alpha and Bedelia was a Beta. An Alpha and a Beta could conceive, but that was rare. Of course, Hannibal wasn't thinking about that when he married her. He never thought he would get this far.

When his father was executed, he and his family managed to find passage on a ship and go into exile to the kingdom of Notus, south of Boreas. The new government of the people had proved to be a disaster. A couple of years later, when the new rulers' priority shifted from erasing nobility to holding on to power, the Lecters had managed to return and reclaim their ancestral home, but not their fortune. Bedelia's family, while very wealthy, was not of noble blood, and Hannibal's family was of noble blood, but not wealthy. Bedelia desired a title and Hannibal wanted to take care of his mother and sister. A marriage between them was killing two birds with one stone.

But things had changed. Hannibal slowly became involved in politics, winning the favor of the few nobles who had dared to return, the admiration of members of the military with his martial skills learned while in exile, and the love of the common people, who remembered the good deeds of the late Count Lecter and which his son continued. All this culminated in the coup d'état in which he managed to dissolve the failed attempt at a Republic decimating what was left of the once prosperous Kingdom of Boreas. And he did it without spilling a single drop of blood. He had become more than just a king. He was an emperor now and intended to bring glory back to his people.

Hannibal would speak to Chiyoh, his faithful assistant, to prepare the divorce papers. He did not doubt that Bedelia would sign after the scare he had given her. Once that matter was settled, his search for a new consort would begin.

Chapter Two

“Put a smile on your face, Will,” Alana begged him.

“I have no reason to smile,” Will replied.

“You look like you're going to a funeral instead of a ball,” his cousin continued. “We're supposed to have fun.”

"What's so fun about a ball?" Will asked. "You have to wear uncomfortable clothes and smile at people you don't know or people you know but don't like."

“I know you don't like socializing, but the Emperor will be at this ball. Aren't you excited?”

“So what if the Emperor is there? A boring ball is a boring ball. Besides, I don't think he would like to join us, swamp folk.”

“When you talk like that you sound just like the people from Zephyr…”

Zephyr was the westernmost kingdom on the continent. Will was born in Boreas, but after the scandal caused by his mother running away with another man and abandoning him and his father when Will was just a baby, his father was forced to leave for another country to escape society's ridicule. His father's cousin and his wife, Alana's parents, followed them.

Zephyr was known as “The Land of Eternal Spring.” It had four seasons, of course, but because of its location the winters were not as intense and the summers were cooler. Will loved that place, it was his true home. His first years there had been perfect… until the new government of Boreas decided to seize his father’s properties there. Those properties were his main source of income. His father’s snobbish “friends” distanced themselves from him as soon as he lost his fortune and began to make fun of them, calling them “swamp folk” because the Grahams were originally from the area of Boreas where freshwater swamps abounded. That didn’t seem to matter when his father did have the money to invite them to lavish parties at his mansion.

Things only got worse when Alana's parents died during a flu epidemic. With no other relatives left, his father had no choice but to take her in, even though he barely had enough money to support himself and Will. But then a miracle happened, or at least that's how his father described it. Count Hannibal Lecter, the eighth of his name, had seized power and was encouraging all those who had fled the revolution to return to Boreas and, if possible, to recover their lost properties.

Will's father, William, better known as Bill, immediately put the manor in Zephyr up for sale and borrowed money here, there, and everywhere to undertake the journey back to Boreas to try to get his house and lands back. So far, he had only managed to recover the old Graham mansion; the lands were still not in his hands.

That was the reason they were going to this ball. The Emperor would be there and his father had every intention of ingratiating himself with him so that he would grant him a private audience and gain his fortune back. After all, he had a son and a niece, both Omegas and both single, to support and many debts to pay.

“Uncle Bill is taking too long,” Alana said, bringing Will out of his thoughts. “We're going to be late.”

“You're right, Alana,” Will replied. "That’d be rude of us. We should cancel this trip.”

Will was about to stand up to exit the carriage when the door opened and his father got in.

"Sorry I'm late, but I just received some excellent news," his father told them before taking a seat and tapping the carriage roof to let the coachman know they were ready to go.

“What news?” Will asked.

“Do you remember the rumor about the emperor wanting to divorce his wife?”

Will and Alana nodded. That story had spread across the entire continent like wildfire.

“Well, it turns out that it's not a rumor, it's the truth,” his father informed them. “The Emperor is already divorced. Countess Bedelia no longer lives at the palace. His Majesty granted her a generous pension for life and a luxurious mansion in Corus."

“What does that have to do with us?” Alana asked.

“Well, His Majesty is looking for a new consort,” his father answered excitedly. A new Omega consort. That’s the important part. The Countess is a Beta, and that's why they couldn't have children together; it was the reason for the divorce. The new empire needs an heir.”

Will knew where his father was going, and he didn't like it at all.

“If one of you two catches his majesty's eye, our family will be saved,” his father said, confirming Will's suspicions.

“Father, his majesty has surely already sent his people all over the continent to find an Omega of noble blood,” Will pointed out. “What makes you think he'll even look at us? Don't you remember what happened with Matthew?”

Matthew Brown was the only child of a prominent family back in Zephyr, and he had taken a fancy to Will. They were engaged for a while, but Will always suspected that Matthew's family had only agreed to the engagement to appease their son and that they never intended to let him marry Will. His father, however, had faith that the marriage would solve all of their problems, so he accepted Matthew's proposal without consulting Will first.

Luckily for Will, and unfortunately for his father, Will's suspicions turned out to be correct. The Browns had no intention of allowing Matthew to marry a poor Omega like him. When

they found a "suitable" match for Matthew, they broke off the engagement and arranged another for their son. That was before "The Miracle."

“This time you'll have to use all of your Omega charms,” his father said, his gaze fixed on the carriage window. “And when I say, ‘all,’ I mean it.”

Will was speechless. He couldn't believe what his father had just told them.

“Uncle!” Alana exclaimed, shocked. “You can’t possibly be insinuating that…”

“I'm not insinuating anything,” his father interrupted. “I'm saying it plainly. We're up to our necks in debt, I don't have the money to pay your dowries. We don’t need His Majesty to ask you to marry him, just one of you convincing him to return our lands is enough. If you have to sleep with him, so be it. And if you manage to conceive a child with him, all the better. We'll be settled for life.

“Father!” Now Will was the one shocked. “I'm not going to…”

“Silence, William!” his father ordered, using his Alpha voice. Will had no choice but to obey. “I'm not asking you to do this just because I feel like it, it's because our survival depends on it. What will happen to you if I die? You will only inherit my debts and with you both single, there's no way you'll be able to pay them.”

Will hated to agree with his father, but it was true. He and Alana had received a good education, but not the kind that would prepare them for a job. Omegas from noble or middle-class families like them didn't work. They were expected to marry and take care of children and the home. He and Alana had no wealthy suitors because they had no dowry, and even if they married working-class Alphas, his father's debts were too substantial, they would have to spend their entire lives trying to scrape together enough money to pay them.

“Sometimes, Will,” his father continued this time more gently, “we have to do things we don't want to do. It's for your own good. So I need you and Alana to do your best to catch His Majesty's attention. Understood?”

Will and Alana nodded mechanically.

“All right,” his father sighed, suddenly looking tired. “Remember, be nice and smile.”

A little while later, the carriage stopped. They had reached their destination.

Chapter Three

Hannibal was in his study, making last-minute revisions to the treaty between Boreas and the Kingdom of Eurus, which would be signed in the coming days. After tonight's ball, the palace would prepare to receive an international delegation.

Speaking of the ball, it had surely already started and he should be there to greet the guests. Hannibal had always been a social person, but he was very tired lately. Not everyone on the continent accepted his new status as emperor. The Lecters were of noble blood, but not royalty, so he had offended many royal houses on the continent by elevating their noble house to an imperial house. To them he was nothing more than an upstart count, taking a position that did not belong to him.

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts.

“Come in,” Hannibal said.

Mischa entered the studio. She was ready for the ball in a high-waisted, puffed-sleeved white dress with patterns embroidered in gold thread. The heavy emerald-green cloak hanging from her shoulders, secured to the front of the dress with a belt, and the beautiful jeweled tiara in Mischa's blonde hair were worthy of the imperial princess she now was.

“Did you forget you have an engagement today?” his sister asked. “The guests are already arriving but Mother and I are waiting for you.”

“I didn't forget,” Hannibal replied, standing up from his desk. “It's just that there's so much to do, treaties to sign, meetings to plan. I need the day to last 30 hours, at least.”

Hannibal plopped down onto the couch. He normally had a lot of energy, but at the end of the day, he was only human and had his limits.

“I never thought the day would come when I'd see you this tired,” Mischa commented, sitting on the couch with him.

“It comes with the job,” he said. “The Aurus delegation will soon arrive to sign the peace treaty, hopefully, it won't be a disaster like the Auster affair.

“The Auster thing? Have you heard from Jack yet?” his sister asked.

“I have. And the news wasn’t good,” Hannibal replied with a grimace. “The king practically laughed in Jack's face when he proposed a marriage between his daughter and me. He refuses to hand over an Omega princess of the purest blood to an upstart like me.”

Mischa snorted when she heard such words.

“It’s better that way,” Mischa declared. “Do you really want to marry the daughter of a man like that? She probably is just as pedantic as he is.”

"It's not a question of whether I want to or not," Hannibal said. "It's a matter of duty. If I marry a princess or a prince and have an heir, my empire will be more legitimate in the eyes of the continent. The threat of war is still there."

Hannibal knew that the kingdom of Boreas would not accept a foreign ruler just because he was of royal blood. But that did not mean that the great powers of the continent would not want to install a puppet government.

Mischa rested her head on Hannibal's shoulder. Hannibal responded by wrapping his arm around her shoulders.

“I know you're doing it for me too,” Mischa whispered. “If I were to be accepted as empress, I would have to marry a suitable person, even if I don't want to.”

“Yes,” Hannibal sighed. “I also want to take that weight off your shoulders. I know you want to marry for love and not duty, and I will make sure you can do that.”

“I love you, Hannibal, “Mischa said. “Thank you for not forcing me to marry Prince Bacciocchi. He is a good man, but I do not wish to marry anyone. Not yet.”

“I would never force you to do something you don't want to, Mischa," he assured her.

“I know,” Mischa replied. “Just for tonight, forget about work and go to the ball with me and Mother. I'm sure you'll meet interesting people.”

“Or meet some greedy people throwing their Omega children at me,” Hannibal laughed, standing up.

“Just ignore them and have fun,” Mischa said, taking him by the arm as they left the studio.

They headed to the ballroom, where their mother was waiting for them. Hannibal kissed her on both cheeks and waited for her and Mischa to be announced to enter the room after them.

“His Imperial Majesty,” announced the valet.

Hannibal walked in. The room was full, but immediately, his eyes met those of the most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

Chapter Four

Chapter Notes

> Simonetta's (Hannibal's mother) title is "Lady Mother," a literal translation of "Madame Mère" which was the title used by Letizia Bonaparte (Napoleon's mother).

The ballroom was packed, but the imperial family wasn't there yet. Will was not religious a religious man, but he secretly prayed to whatever deity might be up there that they would never arrive. His father had already scolded him three times for sneering at anyone approaching them.

"You will go nowhere with that attitude, William," his father had told him when he scared someone away again. "Think about Alana. There are plenty of eligible, single people here. Maybe some of them would be willing to marry her without a dowry."

Will knew that Alana was just as nervous as he was, but she was much better at socializing and had been very charming to the people who came up to talk to her. What a low standard that was. Everyone was better than Will when it came to socializing. It just wasn't his thing.

"Do you think his majesty won't come after all?" Alana asked.

"I hope not," Will replied.

"I hope he does," his father said simultaneously.

His father gave him an annoyed look but before he could scold him once more, the valet appeared to announce the royal family.

"Her Imperial Highness, Princess Mischa, and Her Imperial Highness, the Lady Mother," the valet announced with a booming voice.

Their Imperial Highnesses were elegantly dressed. Both were covered in sparkling jewels, they wore white dresses embroidered with gold. The princess's cloak was green and the Lady Mother's was blue. They sat on either side of an empty throne reserved for His Majesty.

"His Imperial Majesty, the Emperor," announced the valet.

Emperor Hannibal was very different from what Will had imagined. Even though he knew that at 35 he was no old man, hearing of all his accomplishments, in politics and battle, his mind kept conjuring up the image of an aged man. Now that he saw him for the first time, he knew he had been very wrong. He was very handsome, with high cheekbones and well-combed dark blond hair. His suit, which consisted of a coat with a red vest with gold embroidery and white breeches paired with black boots, gave him an imposing appearance.

And his eyes, by God, his eyes! They were amber-colored and seemed to have a reddish glow in the candlelight. And they were fixed on Will…

“His Majesty is looking at us,” Alana whispered excitedly. “He’s more handsome than I thought.”

Will looked away as quickly as possible. Was he blushing? He hoped he wasn’t, but if his heart was racing that fast, he might as well give up on that hope…

“He is!" his father exclaimed, sounding even more excited than Alana. “He's still watching us. Well, not me. Certainly you, Alana. Maybe Will. Or maybe… the both of you?

Oh no. Will must have heard wrong. His father couldn't be so desperate as to hand them both over like that, could he? On second thought, how bad could that be?

Will shook his head almost violently to clear those thoughts away.

“Stop that, Will,” his father scolded him. “Do you want to break your neck? And you ruined your hair!”

He had ruined it, but Will didn't care. He felt a little bad for Alana, who had helped him fix his curls into a decent hairstyle. Now they were all messy and falling over his forehead.

“Alana, please tell me you brought a comb or something,“ Father said, sounding a little desperate. “His Majesty will think you're a savage who doesn't even know how to comb his hair.”

“I think I brought a comb, Uncle,” Alana replied, searching through her handbag. “But I can't find it.”

“Let me help you.”

Will was a mere spectator to this ridiculous scene. His father and his cousin, going crazy over a comb. Will would laugh at them, but he was stunned. Had he been paying more attention, he would have noticed who was approaching them sooner. His father was a minute away from snatching Alana's bag and throwing its entire contents on the floor to see if he could find the damn comb when he reached them.

“Good evening,” his voice was soft and intense, it reminded Will of melted caramel.

His father and Alana immediately stopped what they were doing. The music, which had been a constant background noise, had not stopped, but for Will, the music and the conversations around him were replaced by a ringing in his ears. His majesty was more handsome up close…

He was jolted out of his stupor when an elbow hit his ribs and he realized he had been staring at the Emperor, completely silent, instead of bowing. His cousin and father were bowing and Will awkwardly copied them. That had been very rude of him and His Majesty famously hated rude people. Unfortunately, the main complaint his father received about him was his

lack of manners, something he had never cared about, but today, with his family's future at stake… Will sincerely hoped he hadn't ruined them forever.

"... my niece, Miss Alana Bloom," he heard his father say. "And this is my son, William."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Bloom," His Majesty greeted before kissing Alana's knuckles. Alana's beautiful face blushed at the gesture.

For some strange reason, Will felt disappointed… until his majesty turned to him.

"Nice to meet you too," he said to Will, repeating the kiss on his knuckles, but this time Will was sure that his lips lingered on his hand longer than necessary, "William."

Chapter Five

Hannibal couldn't take his eyes off the young man. He had never seen anyone more beautiful than him. His eyes were bright blue, brighter than any jewel, and his suit, the same blue as his eyes with a lovely silver embroidered pattern, flattered his exquisite figure. He was accompanied by a pretty young woman about his age and an older man. They all shared physical features, so he assumed they must be his sister and father.

The young man seemed distracted. He suddenly shook his head so vigorously that his hair came undone. His loose curls made him look even more beautiful, like a cherub from a painting of heaven. He couldn't stand it any longer; he had to talk to him, to have him close to him.

“Where are you going, Hannibal?” his mother asked him when he stood up from his throne.

“He is going to speak with the young man in the blue suit,” Mischa answered. “He hasn't stopped looking at him since he entered the room.”

His mother turned to where Mischa was looking to see the young man.

"He's a very handsome boy," his mother admitted. "He must be new to the court. I've never seen him before, I'd remember him."

“I'm told that many of tonight's guests have recently returned to the country, “Hannibal replied. “I'm sure this boy and his family did too. Excuse me, Mother, Mischa.”

Hannibal made a beeline towards them. Their scents told him that they were an Alpha and two Omegas. The man and the girl were desperately searching for something in a handbag. The young man continued to stare at them with an almost shocked expression. No one noticed he was there until he spoke.

“Good evening,” he greeted.

The search for the mysterious object stopped immediately. The young man seemed more overwhelmed than before if that was even possible.

“Your Majesty,” the older man replied, bowing with the girl. The young man followed suit after a quick nudge from the girl.

“I don't think we've been introduced,” Hannibal said.

“Unfortunately not, Your Majesty,” the man replied. “Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is William Graham. My family and I have just moved back from Zephyr. This is my niece, Miss Alana Bloom, and this is my son, William.”

“It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Bloom,” Hannibal greeted her with a brief kiss on the knuckles.

Then Hannibal focused all his attention on the young man, William.

“Nice to meet you too,” he said to the boy, before taking his hand and kissing his knuckles like he had done with his cousin, only this time, the kiss was longer. “William.”

William's cheeks flushed beautifully. Hannibal suddenly wished he could make William blush for the rest of their lives and run his hand through those thick curls to make them even messier.

"Mr. Graham," Hannibal said, returning his attention to William's father, "would you be so kind as to allow your son to dance with me?"

If Mr. Graham were a dog, he would have started wagging his tail frantically at the request.

"It would be an honor for me and my son, Your Majesty," Mr. Graham replied, barely containing his emotion.

“But… I don’t know how to dance!” William suddenly exclaimed.

His confused expression turned into a panicked one.

“Will!” Mr. Graham reprimanded. “Don't be insolent!”

“B-but I…,” the poor boy looked like he was about to have a panic attack. The scent he gave off was one of anguish.

“It's all right, William,” Hannibal told him in a gentle voice, putting his hand on his shoulder to try to calm him. “It's just a simple waltz, you just have to follow my steps. But if you don't want to, I won't force you to do it.”

“Of course he wants to—” Mr. Graham began, but Hannibal silenced him with a look.

“What do you say, William?” Hannibal asked him.

William seemed calmer now that he had assured him he would not force him to do anything he didn’t want to. He glanced at his relatives before answering.

"I’ll do it," he said at last. "It will be an honor, Your Majesty."

“The honor is all mine, William,” Hannibal replied with a smile. “This way, please.”

Hannibal led William to the center of the room and signaled the musicians to play a waltz. He began at a slower pace than was necessary so William could follow.

“Tell me, William, how old are you?” Hannibal asked him in an effort to distract him a little from his nervousness.

“I am 27 years old, sir. Your Majesty,” William replied. He blushed again. Waltzing meant both partners had to be very close together.

“You look younger than that,” Hannibal commented.

“Err… yes, people tell me that a lot. That’s why I prefer to have a beard.”

“It suits you.”

"Thank you," William replied, his blush deeper than before.

This boy was a feast for the eyes.

“You're doing very well. Do you really not know how to dance, William?” Hannibal asked.

“I prefer you call me Will, if it's not too bold of me, Your Majesty,” William requested. Will. “That's what everyone calls me. And no, I don't know how to dance. My cousin and I had dancing lessons, but I never learned, I'm too clumsy.”

“Well, you don't seem to be clumsy. You're being an excellent dance partner, Will."

One more compliment and Will's face would turn redder than Hannibal's suit. He was tempted to say something flirtatious to see what would happen, but he didn't want to risk making him faint in the middle of the packed ballroom. He didn’t want to embarrass him publicly.

They finished the dance without incident. The musicians began another waltz and other couples continued dancing. Hannibal would have liked to have another dance, but he had promised Will they would only do it once, so he took him back to his father.

“I appreciated this dance, Will, said Hannibal. “I hope we can repeat this experience someday.”

“Yes, yes, of course, your majesty.”

“I can't wait,” Hannibal told him in a low voice.

Once he left Will with his father, Hannibal returned to his throne, determined. Will Graham would be his.

Chapter Seven

His father and cousin couldn't contain their excitement. Will, on the other hand, just wanted to sleep. The trip back home seemed to be twice as long.

“I'm just saying, Will, you'd look more elegant if you shaved off your beard,” his father insisted.

“Father, I already told you that I don’t like to look younger than I am," Will replied, increasingly irritated. “Besides, the emperor said he liked it.” He said that last thing without thinking and immediately regretted it.

“Really?” Alana asked effusively. “Will, I can't believe it. You're so lucky. His majesty was enchanted by you.”

“He didn't take his eyes off you all night,” his father said, proudly. If his father were a dog, he would have pissed himself in excitement when the emperor approached them at the ball.

“You’re overreacting,” said Will. “I'm sure he forgot about me as soon as he danced with other people.”

His Majesty had danced with several people besides him. Seven to be exact. Will didn't know why he kept counting or why seeing the Emperor dancing with others bothered him.

“Yes, but all of them asked the emperor for the dance and not the other way around as he did with you,” Alana pointed out. “And of course, he wasn't going to say no, his majesty is too polite to do that.”

“Maybe, but he only danced with me once,” Will had to admit that he had expected the Emperor to ask him to dance again and had been a little hurt when he didn't.

“Of course not, Will,” his father replied, clicking his tongue. “You nearly fainted when His Majesty asked you to dance. I almost forced you to accept.”

“His Majesty would not have forced me to dance with him,” Will said quietly. That had pleased him. A man as powerful as the emperor could order them to do as he pleased, but he was gentle and patient with Will when they danced.

“He's quite the gentleman,” Alana sighed dreamily.

“He's a great man, I ought to admit it,” his father said. “Will, I know I'm putting a huge weight on your shoulders. But you have to know I did everything to keep us from getting to this point…

“I know, Father,” Will replied.

He did. His father sold off his most valuable possessions to support them, like silverware, fancy china, and artwork. When Will was a child, they had servants and a beautiful house. By the time he was a teenager, their mansion was in disrepair. It was expensive to maintain and things like food and clothing were the priority, not aesthetics. His father's request was out of desperation, and if his circumstances were different, he would never have suggested he get into the Emperor's bed. He knew that, but that didn't make it any easier. They spoke little, but Will genuinely liked the Emperor and didn't want him to think Will was a gold-digger.

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Winston turned out to be very easy to train. He had been a little skittish, but that was to be expected. Will had found him wandering down a lonely road shortly after arriving in Boreas. He was on a leash, but he was thin and dirty. The poor thing had probably run away, or his owner had just dumped him. Either way, it didn't matter because Winston was now his. It had taken some effort to convince his father to keep the dog. He said the last thing they needed was another mouth to feed, but he finally agreed when he saw the poor creature's condition.

“Will, get up from the floor, you're dirtying your clothes,” Alana scolded him from the kitchen, where she was washing the dishes.

Will ignored her and continued to pet Winston on the floor. Today was his father's turn to sweep the house. Right now he was on the second floor. Soon he would come down to sweep the ground floor and probably say the same thing as Alana. But Will liked to lie next to Winston, he didn't care what they told him.

Someone knocked on the door.

“Alana, there's someone at the door!” Will shouted, with no intention of getting up.

“Well, go get the door, I'm busy!” Alana replied.

Will ignored her again. There was another knock on the door.

“Someone’s at the door! Go get it, Will!” came his father's voice from upstairs.

Will made a noise of annoyance and stood up reluctantly. He hated visitors and he hated being the one to greet them. If it were up to him, he would have long ago become a hermit with only dogs as companions. As he opened the door, he was crossing his fingers that whoever had come to bother them wouldn't take long. However, behind the door was the last person he expected to see.

“Your Majesty?” he asked incredulously.

For a moment he thought he was hallucinating or had fallen asleep next to Winston, but it was the Emperor in the flesh, standing on his doorstep. He was dressed much more simply this time, in a black coat, tan trousers, and riding boots, his riding crop and hat still in his

hand. He looked very handsome, though, and Will was suddenly aware that his clothes were all wrinkled and dirty with dust and dog hair.

“Will? Who was…? Oh my God!” he heard Alana exclaim behind him.

Alana’s dress was faded from too many washes and her hands were still soapy, but she managed to curtsy elegantly.

“Welcome, your majesty,” she said.

"Thank you very much, Miss Bloom," His Majesty replied placidly.

He didn't seem offended at the way they greeted him.

“Will, Alana, who was at the door?” His father came down the stairs with spiderwebs in his hair and a broom in his hands. When he saw who was at the door, he made a futile effort to hide the broom behind him, as if that would help.

“Your Majesty!” he exclaimed nervously, bowing awkwardly, still with the broom behind his back. “It is… it is an honor to have you in our humble home. Please, come in.”

“Thank you, Mr. Graham,” the Emperor said. His eyes met Will’s for a moment.

Will realized he had frozen in place and was blocking the entrance. He immediately moved away.

“Alana, bring something to drink for our guest,” his father asked, discreetly trying to remove the spiderwebs from his hair, but he only made them fall on his shoulders.

“There’s no need for that, Mr. Graham,” His Majesty said. “I came here because I wanted to invite your son to go for a walk with me.”

“What?” Will asked.

His father and Alana looked like they were about to burst with excitement.

“Of course, of course, what an honor,” answered his father, grinning like a madman.

His smile disappeared quickly when he noticed Will’s appearance, with old clothes covered in dog hair and bare feet.

“Uh… If you’ll allow me, Your Majesty, Will has to change his clothes. We weren’t expecting any visitors today,” his father explained, taking Will by the arm. “It’ll just be a moment. In the meantime, Alana can keep you company on the couch…”

But Winston was lying on the couch, calmly watching the scene unfold.

“Get down from there, Winston!” his father threw the dog out of the couch. But it was too late, it was already covered in dog hair.

“It’s all right, Mr. Graham, I can wait,” His Majesty said.

To everyone's surprise, he sat on the offered couch without a complaint. Meanwhile, Will's father dragged him upstairs to his bedroom.

“Come on, Will, put on your best clothes,” his father ordered. “Make sure they aren’t covered with Winston’s hair. But don't make it look like you're trying too hard.”

Will did as he asked, still bewildered. It seemed the Emperor had a knack for leaving him like that every time they met.

“Get ready as quickly as you can,” his father said. “Remember what I told you. We need to gain the Emperor's favor, our subsistence depends on it. So be nice, smile, and do anything he asks of you. Anything. Understood?”

“Yes, father,” Will replied.

His father just nodded. There was no trace of the manic excitement from downstairs on his face. Now he just looked tired. He left the room without saying another word.

Chapter Seven

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Maybe wearing black wasn't a good idea. Dog hair was more noticeable in that color. But sometimes you have to make certain sacrifices to gain the greatest rewards. Besides, Hannibal had made worse sacrifices than a little dog hair on his clothes.

As Mr. Graham had promised, Will didn't take long to dress. When he came downstairs, he was dressed in a simple suit, a high-collared shirt, breeches, and boots. What a handsome sight Will was, masculine, broad-shouldered, with a slim torso and long legs. The narrow waist was an obvious indication that he was an Omega.

"I'm ready, Sire," Will said timidly.

Hannibal offered his arm, which Will took, blushing. They had only met a few days ago, but Hannibal had already become addicted to Will's red cheeks. They said goodbye to Mr. Graham and Alana and left the house.

"Where are we going?" Will asked once they were outside.

"There's a clearing not far from here with a river nearby," Hannibal replied. "I thought we could go there, have something to eat, and talk. I noticed you're wearing riding boots. Do you know how to ride a horse?"

"Yes, Sire. I rode horses when I lived in Zephyr. But I don't have one here," Will told him.

"Would you like to ride again? I brought mine," Hannibal offered, pointing to the horse with a movement of his chin.

"Really?" Will asked excitedly. "I would love to. If it is okay with your majesty," he added quickly.

"Of course. Come, I'll help you." Hannibal said, offering his hand when they reached the horse.

Will was more relaxed now with the prospect of a horseback ride ahead. He took Hannibal's hand, who helped him mount the horse.

"What's their name?" Will asked, referring to the animal.

"His name is Bellerophon"* Hannibal answered, stroking the chestnut horse's neck. "He's an older horse. He's calm and trustworthy but also has a strange habit of lying down when he eats."

"I've never seen a horse do that," Will commented.

“Neither did I until I saw Bellerophon.”

“Bellerophon,” pronounced Will. “It's the name of a mythological hero, isn't it?”

"That's right," Hannibal said. It pleased him to know Will was a knowledgeable young man.

They set off. Will rode Bellerophon, who was moving slowly, and Hannibal walked, holding the horse's reins. The clearing and the river were nearby, so it was a short walk and ride. When they arrived, Hannibal helped Will dismount. He was sure Will could do that himself, but he still accepted Hannibal's help. From the baskets on either side of the horse, he took out the supplies he brought: a blanket for them to sit on, some cutlery, and most importantly, food.

"When you mentioned food, I thought you meant something simpler," Will commented upon seeing all that.

“If I’m in charge of the meal, it will never be simple,” Hannibal replied, taking a seat on the blanket. “Come sit with me, Will.”

“If you’re in charge?” Will wondered, sitting next to him.

“Cooking is an art I enjoy very much. I learned while in exile,” Hannibal explained. “I brought roast beef, potato salad, and sausages I prepared this morning.”

“Looks good. Thank you, “ Will said. “Sire,” he added hastily once more.

“You don't have to call me "Your Majesty" or "Sire" all the time,” Hannibal told him. “You can call me by my name.”

Poor Will nearly choked on his food when he heard that.

“I would not dare!” Will exclaimed once he recovered. “If anyone heard me speaking to you in such a familiar way—”

“You don't have to worry about that,” Hannibal assured him. “You asked me to call you Will instead of William, now I ask you to call me by my name.”

Will still wasn’t convinced and avoided looking him in the eye. Hannibal gently placed his hand on his forearm.

“Why don't you tell me about your life in Zephyr?” Hannibal asked. “The land of eternal spring. I visited once as a boy, but I don't remember much about the visit.”

“Yes, it is a very beautiful place,” Will replied. “I liked living there, but… things got too difficult.”

“Money troubles?”

“Mostly that. But also the people?”

“The people?”

“Yes,” Will sighed. “During the revolution, the government seized my father’s lands and the mill he got his income from. Then Alana's parents died and she was left in my father's care. Little by little we ran out of money and those who had been our friends no longer wanted to associate with us. That's why Alana and I are almost spinsters. No decent person would marry their children to poor swamp folk.”

"Swamp folk?" Hannibal asked, frowning.

“That's what they called us because the Grahams are originally from the swamps,” Will explained. “All of them ignored that detail when my father entertained them at our house, though. How convenient.”

“So you and Alana didn't have any suitors there.”

“Well, I was engaged for a while,” Will replied shyly.

"Is that so?" Hannibal asked, hoping that the jealousy he suddenly felt wouldn't show.

“Yes. With the Alpha son of a noble family. Matthew. I don't know how he convinced his parents to accept the engagement, but it was obvious that they wouldn't allow us to marry. I had nothing to offer them.” Will seemed ashamed of this fact. He kept his eyes downcast. “I was right. They broke off the engagement in the end.”

“Did it bother you that you couldn't marry him?” Hannibal asked in a monotone voice.

“Honestly, I was relieved,” Will admitted. “Matthew was… too intense.”

"I see," Hannibal replied, also feeling relieved.

After that, they completely changed the subject. The conversation was pleasant. They talked about books they had read and things they liked to do. Will told him about the rivers in Zephyr where fish were abundant and where he fished mostly for fun. When Hannibal mentioned that he had never partaken in such an activity, Will offered to teach him. Hannibal accepted the offer, although he was not keen on spending hours by the river waiting for fish to bite the bait, but Will could have invited him over to his house to stare at the wall all day and he would have still accepted.

****

They returned to Will's house as the sun set over the horizon. Once again, Hannibal walked holding the reins and Will rode Bellerophon. Before Hannibal could offer his hand to help him dismount, Will extended his arm. With a smile, Hannibal helped him. They might have been closer than strictly necessary, but neither complained.

“Thank you for this lovely afternoon, Will,” Hannibal said. “I'll talk to your father later, but I wanted to ask you first. I want to court you, Will. Will you allow me?”

Will closed his eyes for a moment and opened them again. They were big and blue. Beautiful.

“I… We’ve only met twice, but I feel like I’ve been waiting my whole life for this moment.” Will said. “I don’t know how to explain it…” he trailed off.

“You don't have to explain it,” Hannibal said, taking Will's hand. “I know how you feel because I feel the same way.”

“Yes,” Will replied after a few seconds of silence, his hand in Hannibal's. “Yes, I want you to court me… Hannibal.”

Hannibal wasn't sure he could speak without his voice shaking. Instead, he leaned in to kiss Will. They met in the middle, as Will had leaned in as well.

At that moment, Hannibal knew with absolute certainty that he could never be away from Will again.

Chapter End Notes

*Bellerophon is a hero from Greek mythology, but I named the horse after HMS Bellerophon, a ship active during the Napoleonic Wars. The curious detail of a horse lying down to eat is inspired by Copenhagen, a war horse that belonged to the Duke of Wellington with that quirk.

The picnic menu is inspired by Auguste Escoffier, king of chefs and chef of kings. During the Franco-Prussian War, Auguste was an army cook. He always tried to feed the soldiers nutritious meals such as roast beef, potato salad, eggs, and fresh sausages. That was when he had the resources to do it, obviously.

Chapter Eight

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A couple of months later…

Sometimes Will thought he was dreaming, that he never met Hannibal that night or danced with him, that he never asked his permission to court him or kiss him, and that any moment he would wake up in his room at the old house in Zephyr, mourning the loss of something he never had. But whenever Hannibal kissed him, Will was convinced it wasn't a dream. Every time Hannibal kissed him, he felt awake and very much alive.

"You have that look on your face again," Alana commented in a mischievously. "You must be thinking of his majesty."

"Yes, I'm thinking about Hannibal," Will said with a smile.

To Will, he was no longer "his majesty" or "the emperor," a distant and cold figure, but Hannibal, calm and warm.

"Next time you see him, give him my most sincere thanks," Alana asked. "The gifts he sent us are beautiful."

When Hannibal began their courtship, his father almost cried, joyful, and declared that if his son was to be courted by an emperor, he, his father, could not allow the family to wear old clothing. That was not worthy of such a venerable presence as that of his majesty, so he was willing to add more debt to get new wardrobes for all of them. Will tried convincing him that it was unnecessary, but his father was stubborn. Luckily, he didn't have to go into more debt, because the next day after the courtship was made official, a carriage full of gifts for them arrived from the palace. Hannibal had sent them beautiful things. Perfumes, jewelry, fans with elaborate designs for Alana, and luxurious fabrics along with a note in the emperor's handwriting, letting them know that his favorite tailor was waiting for them soon to create new suits and dresses for all of them. The gifts had not stopped since then. Almost every week they received something new. Even Winston received a bed as a gift. It was a very cute thing. It looked exactly like a human bed but reduced to the size of a dog.

"You can thank him yourself, Alana," Will said.

"Is His Majesty coming to visit us?" Alana asked, a little distracted by the delicate bracelet she had on her hands.

Hannibal visited them sometimes, but he and Will usually strolled around the city. The capital of Boreas, Solanus, was a beautiful place not to be outshone by the cities in Zephyr. It was

strange to think that such a beautiful place had been the center of violence, executions, and disorder before Hannibal brought peace back to the country.

“No,” Will told Alana. “This time we will visit him. At the palace.”

Alana almost dropped the delicate gold piece in shock.

“At the palace?” she repeated, incredulous.

“Yes,” Will confirmed. “Hannibal wants me to meet his mother and sister. You and my father are also invited.”

“Goodness, Will, why didn't you tell me? We need to get our best clothes ready. When are we going? Will it be soon?” Alana sounded a little frantic and started pacing around the room.

“Calm down, Alana,” Will chuckled. “It will be next week, Hannibal told me yesterday. “That's why he sent those presents for you. I told him you would only wear jewels worthy of an imperial palace.”

“Thank you so much, Will. You are the best,” Alana thanked him sincerely, sitting with him again. “His Majesty loves you very much; you are very lucky. I must confess I’m a little jealous. I would like to have someone who loves me like that too.”

“Don't worry,” Will said gently, taking his cousin's hand. “I’m sure you’ll meet someone soon. Who knows, you might even find someone from a noble house.”

“We'll see about that,” Alana giggled.

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Hannibal greeted them in person the following week. Ever the gentleman, he offered his hand to Will and Alana to help them out of the carriage. That day he wore a suit of such a deep red that at first glance it looked black, embroidered with golden details, just as Hannibal liked. Will's suit was black, but the details were embroidered with gold thread. Will's father wore a dark blue suit, and Alana wore a pretty white dress with a colorful, intricately patterned shawl that contrasted with the relative simplicity of the dress.

“Thank you very much for coming,” said Hannibal. “It is a pleasure to have you here.”

“The pleasure is all ours, Your Majesty,” his father said. He and Alana bowed before the emperor.

Will didn't even bother to do the same. It would be weird to bow to the man he kissed every day. The thought made him blush. Luckily, Hannibal thought he was just nervous.

“There’s no need to feel anxious,” Hannibal assured them, offering his arm to Will, who accepted it. “My mother and sister are excited because they’re finally meeting you. Please follow me.”

But Will was still nervous. Hannibal loved his mother and sister very much and what Will wanted the most was to make a good impression on them. Will wasn't exactly known for having excellent manners. That's why he had no friends, except Alana, who was his cousin and had no choice. He got nervous around people, was sarcastic, and didn't think twice before insulting people's intelligence or lack thereof, but sometimes people said the most stupid things... What if Hannibal's family thought he was rude and found him offensive? Maybe Hannibal's mother would ask him not to marry Will. Hannibal wouldn't listen to her, he was sure of it. Even if the Lady Mother and the Imperial Princess hated him, Will wasn't willing to part with Hannibal. Still, it would be better for everyone if they got along.

Will was so absorbed in such thoughts that he did not notice they had reached an antechamber, with servants bowing deeply to the Emperor, until they stopped in front of a door that Hannibal knocked twice.

"Come in," a voice called from inside.

Hannibal went in first with Will by his arm, his father and cousin followed. They were in a room with decorative woodwork, a vaulted ceiling, and heavy red curtains drawn back to let the sunlight in. Beyond that lay another room that appeared to be a library.

The Lady Mother and the princess were waiting by a table with a nice tea set. Hannibal's mother was a tall, beautiful woman with her dark blonde hair pulled back. She wore a simple but elegant black dress. Hannibal told him that his mother dressed in black every day, in honor of her deceased husband. The only exceptions were parties and other court activities. Princess Mischa was very beautiful, she resembled her brother. She was only three years younger than Hannibal, but her delicate features made her look younger than her actual age. Her dress was burgundy and had short puffed sleeves.

"Your Highnesses," they all greeted, bowing simultaneously.

Will's father had insisted that they practice that bow all last week. Will did so reluctantly but was now grateful for that. He hoped that such synchronization would please their imperial highnesses.

"Please take a seat," the Lady Mother said gently. She and her daughter sat next to each other.

Hannibal and Will sat together, with Alana and Will's father on either side. The princess poured tea for everyone. Will found that very interesting. He thought nobles never lifted a finger and had servants for even the most mundane tasks like serving tea. But Hannibal enjoyed cooking and was very good at it. There couldn't be many emperors around who did that.

"What a beautiful room, Your Highness," his father commented.

"Thank you, Mr. Graham," the Lady Mother answered. "My children and I were very involved in redesigning this palace. It had been unused for a long time."

"Isn't this the palace of the old kings?" Alana asked.

“No, that one was destroyed the same year the royal family was put to death.”

“This palace also belonged to the royal family, but in recent decades it had been very neglected,” the princess added.

The conversation revolved around architectural styles and color theory. Will knew nothing about such things so he continued to sip his tea, wondering if their imperial highnesses thought it was odd that he was so quiet. He was getting nervous again, but Hannibal’s hand on his knee calmed him down. Hannibal was always in tune with Will’s feelings. He thanked him with a smile.

“What did you think of the palace, Will?” Hannibal's mother asked him.

“Um… it’s a very nice place, Your Highness,” Will answered, internally reprimanding himself for using such a generic term as ‘nice.’ “We haven’t seen much, but the garden is beautiful.”

“Thank you very much, Will," the Lady Mother said with a smile. “Gardening is a hobby of mine. I get a lot of help from the garden workers, of course. But I love growing roses and caring for them with my own hands.”

“My mother has real talent,” Hannibal commented. “No one would believe that the garden was nothing more than a plot of land invaded by weeds when we moved here.”

“Impressive!” Alana exclaimed. “Congratulations, Your Highness.”

“Thank you, Alana.”

The conversation turned to gardening and tips to prevent plants from dying prematurely. During a lull, Hannibal glanced at his mother and sister. It seemed they both understood that look, as they offered to show Mr. Graham and Alana the garden and other decorative details. But they didn't say anything about Will.

Before they left, Alana said goodbye with a squeeze on his shoulder, leaving Will alone with Hannibal.

“Did you like the palace, Will?” Hannibal asked him.

“Yes, it's lovely. I've never been in a palace before,” Will answered earnestly.

“And… would you like to live here, with me?” Hannibal asked. He sounded a little unsure suddenly.

“Live here with you?” Will repeated. “What do you mean by that? Are you asking me to be your concubine?” Will asked in a hurt voice.

“Concubine? Of course not, Will!”Hannibal looked offended at such a suggestion. “I wouldn't disrespect you by asking such a thing of you. Forgive me, I didn't express myself well.”

Hannibal stood up and pushed his chair away.

“I asked my mother and Mischa to distract Alana and your father because I didn't want you to feel pressured when I did this.”

Hannibal knelt in front of him. Was Hannibal going to…? He pulled a box out of his jacket pocket. Yes, he was going to do it. Goodness!

“Will, you and I have known each other for less than a year, I know that,” Hannibal said. “But ever since I saw you that first night, I knew my place was by your side. I've always thought that soulmates were just tales for children, but since I met you, I started believing that it must be true because you are my soulmate. Will you marry me?”

Hannibal opened the box. Will gasped as he saw the beautiful silver ring with two teardrop-shaped diamonds of different colors. The blue diamond faced down and the red diamond faced up.

“Yes, Hannibal,” Will answered with a trembling voice. “Yes, I want to marry you, there is nothing I want more in this life.”

Hannibal put the ring on him. His engagement ring. Will couldn't help but shed some happy tears.

“You've made me the happiest man alive, Will,” Hannibal said. He leaned over to give Will a quick kiss.

“Hannibal, do your mother and sister approve of this?” Will asked him.

“Of course they do, Will," Hannibal assured him. “But even if they didn't, I would still marry you.”

Will knew Hannibal was telling the truth, but he was relieved Hannibal's family agreed.

“And what about Mr. Crawford?” Will asked. “I know he doesn't like me since that incident with Winston.”

Jack Crawford had been sent by Hannibal to Will's house on one occasion to deliver another batch of presents for Will. If he was already upset at being forced to act as an errand boy, his mood did not improve after he was "attacked" by Winston after knocking on Will’s door. The dog was simply excited and tried to greet him enthusiastically. Yes, he had made Jack fall over himself and covered him in drool and hair. Will thought it was no big deal and that all the complaining was unnecessary, this Jack was nothing but a drama queen and a whiner. And Will had no qualms to say that out loud. To Mr. Crawford's face.

“Jack will get over it soon,” Hannibal replied. “I'll talk to him, but rest assured. I don’t care what he says. You will be my prince consort.

Will couldn't help but throw himself into Hannibal’s arms. He loved him so much.

“Come, Will,” Hannibal said, before pulling away from him and kissing him on the forehead. “Let's go find your father and your cousin. I'm sure you'll want to break the news.”

“I'll wait until I get home,” Will said accepting Hannibal's extended arm. “I don’t know if my father and Alana can contain their excitement.”

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The palace’s garden was a stunning place. They found their families there, along with a tall, elegant woman Will didn’t know. An Alpha, it seemed. She was wearing a beautiful golden dress and a matching headdress. Alana was talking to her excitedly.

“Do you know who is the lady speaking with Alana?” Will asked as they approached.

“That is Lady Margot Verger,” Hannibal told him. "Her noble house is one of the oldest and richest in Boreas.”

“I've heard about the Vergers. Especially about her brother, Mason,” Will commented. “Nothing good, though.”

“Mason is… a very troubled man,” Hannibal said. "He takes great pleasure in challenging me. He thinks he is better suited to bear the title of emperor. It's hard to keep my cool around him sometimes. Margot, however, is a real lady. I find it hard to believe they're twins.”

Once everyone had said their goodbyes to the imperial family and Lady Margot, Hannibal accompanied Will and his relatives to the carriage that would take them back home. Will was the last to get in and Hannibal kissed him goodbye.

His father and Alana wouldn’t stop talking about the fun they had at the palace. Will was silent but couldn't wipe a huge smile off his face.

“Will! What did you and His Majesty do when you were alone?” Alana asked mischievously.

“Not what you’re thinking! Get your mind out of the gutter,” Will chuckled.

“Of course not. His Majesty is quite the gentleman,” his father said, seemingly relieved.

“But something did happen. Something important," Will announced. He had planned to wait until they got home but couldn't wait any longer. “Hannibal… He asked me to marry him. And I said yes.”

Will was right when he decided it was best to wait until they left the palace grounds to tell his family the news. When he showed them his engagement ring, they were not happy—that would be an understatement—they were euphoric.

Chapter End Notes

The imperial palace and gardens are based on the Château de Malmaison, the residence of Joséphine and Napoleon Bonaparte.

Chapter Nine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Your Majesty, I ask you to reconsider,” Jack repeated for the umpteenth time. “I know that the great houses are unwilling to offer their children’s hands in marriage, but there are offers from lesser houses.”

“Jack, I already told you that the four great kingdoms could offer me their children on a silver platter tomorrow and I would still refuse them,” Hannibal replied, more focused on writing down the menu for his wedding banquet that he would send to the cooks later. He couldn't cook himself, but he would ensure everything was perfect. “Remember, I'm already engaged.”

“The whole point of finding a new spouse was supposed to gain an air of legitimacy to your empire,” Jack reminded him. “It would add royal blood to your house and any heirs such a union might produce. William Graham isn't royalty. He's not even noble, and his father can't afford a dowry. He's up to his neck in debt!”

“Debts that I will soon take care of,” Hannibal assured, without taking his eyes off his list. “Soon we will be related.”

“That's another problem,” Jack replied. “Such a marriage means that you will be responsible for the father and the cousin for the rest of their lives. In Miss Bloom's case, at least until she gets married, but then you will be responsible for her dowry.”

“I know, and I have no problem with that,” Hannibal replied, impassive. “Alana’s marriage may be sooner than we thought. Lady Margot has shown interest in her and Will tells me that Alana is also interested.”

“Mason Verger will not approve of that,” Jack muttered.

“But I approve of it,” Hannibal said firmly, looking Jack in the eyes for the first time since he entered his study. “I finally understood something. It doesn't matter what I do to please people like Mason or the rulers of the great houses. They have decided that I am not worthy of being where I am because my father was not a king, nor was my father's father a king, and I will never be able to change that. I will do everything I can to keep the peace, but I am not willing to lose Will.”

“But did it have to be him? Out of all people?” asked Jack. “That Will is just so… rude. Like his dog.”

“I assure you, Winston is very well trained,” Hannibal said. “But he is still a dog and sometimes he gets excited. He just wanted to say hello to you.”

“‘Say hello.’ Yeah, right.” Jack said under his breath.

Hannibal held back his laughter. He never knew Jack was so sensitive and spiteful. All because of a bit of dog slobber.

“Okay,” Jack said in a louder voice. “I see there's nothing I can do to change your mind.”

“That's right,” Hannibal agreed.

“Then I will take my leave. Excuse me, Your Majesty,” Jack bowed and left.

Finally! That repetitive conversation was giving him a headache. Now he could continue planning the menu in peace.

There was a knock on his door. Hannibal sighed.

“Come in,” he called.

Chiyoh walked in and she didn't look happy at all.

“Your former wife is here,” she said bluntly. “She insists on speaking with you, but it's obvious she's just come to cause a scene.”

Hannibal sighed yet again. What did Bedelia want now?

“Tell her to come in,” Hannibal asked Chiyoh. “I want to end this as quickly as possible.”

Chiyoh nodded and went back out. Bedelia, elegant as ever, was quick to enter.

"Hannibal," Bedelia greeted.

“I'm afraid it’s 'Your Majesty' or 'Sire' to you, Bedelia,” Hannibal corrected her. “We're no longer married.”

“I just have found out that soon “His Majesty” will not be unwed for long,” Bedelia commented. “I heard that he got engaged to some poor Omega. Did you really change me for someone like that?”

“We divorced because we can't have children together,” Hannibal explained to her. He had no idea how many times he had repeated that line. “When we got married that wasn't a concern, but now that I've created a new dynasty, having heirs of my blood is one of my highest priorities. That I can't have children with you is not the fault of either of us. It's simply biology, something we can't control.”

“I think I would have been less upset if you had chosen a prince or princess to take my place,” Bedelia said, sitting on the sofa in the study. “I could accept that.”

“What do you want, Bedelia?” Hannibal asked, fed up with her.

"There are so many things I wish for," Bedelia replied. "I wish you had been more honorable, instead of throwing me out on the street as soon as I was no longer useful to you."

“Throw you out on the street?” Hannibal asked incredulously. “Don't make me laugh, Bedelia. I gave you a lifetime pension so you could live without worrying about money for the rest of your life. You have a huge castle and servants to take care of you. I gave you the title of duchess.”

“Duchess, but not empress,” Bedelia pointed out. “There is a big difference between those two titles.”

“Yes,” Hannibal conceded, rising from his desk. “But you have to admit that it is a much greater title than the one you had when we were married, which was… none.”

“ I didn't have a title,” Bedelia accepted. “But you must admit that my money helped you get to where you are today.”

“I've never denied it,” Hannibal replied, checking his pocket watch. “When you married me you were rich and nothing more. Now you are much more than just rich. I have more than repaid you the money you spent on me.”

Bedelia snorted in response.

“You'll have to excuse me, Bedelia, but it's getting late and I'll be leaving soon to visit my fiancé,” Hannibal informed her.

“Did you know that your fiancé was engaged in the past?” Bedelia asked out of the blue. “And for several years, too.”

“Yes, I did know,” Hannibal replied, increasingly annoyed.

“With such a long engagement, I can't help but wonder if that boy is a virgin,” Bedelia commented. “Maybe that's why he's still single at his age. He slept with his previous fiancé and then the engagement was broken off. That's why he came to Boreas. He must have a bad reputation in Zephyr. No decent person would want to marry their children to him.”

“That's none of your business, Bedelia,” Hannibal struggled to keep his cool.

“I'm just saying that a marriage with someone like that will give your empire a bad reputation,” Bedelia said, in an innocent tone. “Who will take you seriously if your consort has the reputation of being loose?”

The sudden sound of an object hitting the floor and breaking made Bedelia jump on the couch. Hannibal's pocket watch lay broken on the floor, where Hannibal had thrown it with force and anger.

“Don't ever say things like that about Will again,” Hannibal said, not raising his voice, but with a tone that would make anyone's hair stand on end. His Alpha scent had become incredibly intense. “If I find out you're telling people that, you'll end up worse than this watch, Bedelia. I swear.”

Hannibal completed the threat by stomping on the watch. Bedelia was speechless. Never in their ten years of marriage had she seen Hannibal so furious.

“Get out of here,” Hannibal ordered. “And don't come here again without asking me permission first.”

Bedelia practically fled the studio and Hannibal closed the door behind her more forcefully than necessary. He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. He didn't want to go to Will giving off a scent full of anger and aggression.

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Hannibal hadn't even reached the front door when it opened and Will jumped straight into his arms. Any residual traces of anger disappeared completely. He could not stay upset when he had Wil in his arms. Will's scent always calmed him.

“Did you just smell me?” Will asked with a giggle, still hugging Hannibal.

“Difficult to avoid,” Hannibal replied, shamelessly.

The hug lasted a while longer. How far they had come in such a short time. The Will he had met a few months ago would never have thrown himself into Hannibal's arms or shown his love so openly. Will had come out of his shell now and wasn't afraid to speak his mind to people's faces, and nobles were no exception. Neither was Hannibal, but he loved that about Will, and it gave him a secret pleasure to see the shocked faces of the nobility when someone of humble origins made them look like idiots.

“You didn't bring Billy* today?” Will asked when they pulled apart.

Hannibal grimaced. Will had started calling Bellerophon, the horse, “Billy,” because he thought the name was a tongue twister.

“No,” Hannibal told him. “Today I wanted to walk with you through the palace gardens. We'll get there quicker by carriage.”

Hannibal helped Will into the carriage. However, Hannibal couldn't stop thinking about Bede throughout the journeylia's words. Will had already told him about her engagement to Matthew Brown. Whether they had consummated their relationship on a physical level didn't really matter. That had been years ago and Will was going to marry him, not Matthew, but Hannibal couldn't help but feel jealous.

“Hannibal? We're here,” he heard Will say.

“Sorry, Will. I got distracted,” Hannibal apologized.

Walking with Will through the beautiful gardens was one of Hannibal's favorite pastimes. He couldn't wait to have this every day. He was a busy man, but he would always find a way to make time for his Will.

One statue in particular was Will's favorite. It depicted the hero Perseus holding aloft the severed head of Medusa. It was an obligatory stop on every walk and this time was no exception.

“I know something's wrong with you,” Will said suddenly, turning his back on the statue. “You've been very distracted today.”

“Don't worry,” Hannibal reassured him. “It’s nothing important.”

“What is it?” Will insisted.

“Nothing important. Just something Bedelia said. She wasn't pleased to hear about our engagement.”

Will frowned. He didn't know her personally, but it was obvious that he didn't like Bedelia one bit. That made Hannibal feel better. Will was also jealous of a past relationship.

“She came here?” Will asked.

“Yes, earlier today,” he replied.

“What did she say to you?” Will asked again.

Hannibal thought about making up something else to not offend Will, but he knew it wouldn’t work. He and Will were so in tune that sometimes it was as though they could read each other's minds. Absentmindedly, Hannibal wondered if there was a scientific explanation for that and the instantaneous attraction the two felt when they met. He would have to look into it.

“Bedelia said something offensive about you,” Hannibal finally confessed. “She thinks you are still unmarried at your age because you surely were… dishonored by your first fiancé and no one in Zephyr would want to marry a son or daughter of theirs to someone… like that.”

“So Bedelia is worried that you're going to marry a whore Omega,” said Will, unfazed.

“She didn't use that word,” Hannibal said uncomfortably.

“She didn't have to, what she meant was clearly understood,” Will replied.

“Will,” Hannibal said, “I ordered her not to repeat those things. I would cut her tongue out if I find out she's speaking ill of you.”

It wasn't an exaggeration. He would do it.

“I know,” Will sighed. “I don't like her. She won't accept that your marriage to her is over. But just to be clear, I didn't do anything with Matthew. Or anyone else. If I'm still unwed at this age it's because I don't have a dowry and without it, I'm not a good match for anyone.”

“You don't have to explain yourself, Will,” Hannibal assured him. “I don't care what you have or haven't done. I love you, Will, and I will marry you, no matter what anyone says.”

Will, who had been frowning ever since he mentioned Bedelia, smiled at Hannibal's statement. He climbed onto the low pedestal of the statute of Perseus’, which left him standing at the same height as Hannibal.

“I know that,” Will said, placing both hands on Hannibal's shoulders. “I love you too.”

Hannibal couldn't say which of the two initiated the kiss. Maybe they both did it at the same time, that's how synchronized they were.

When the kiss ended, Will rested his head on Hannibal's shoulder.

“Hannibal, can I ask something of you?” Will asked.

“Whatever you want, dear Will,” Hannibal promised, holding Will against his body.

“Send Bedelia an invitation to our wedding,” Will requested.

“Cruel boy,” Hannibal said fondly. “I'll send that invitation immediately.”

Chapter End Notes

*Sailors called the ship HMS Bellerophon "Billy Ruffian" or "Billy Ruff'n" because they found her real name too difficult to pronounce.

Chapter Ten

Chapter Notes

> So... the Human Heart Guy. How do you spell his name? I've seen it spelled as "Anthony" and "Antony." I used "Antony" here.

An emperor's wedding was supposed to be a grand event, for it was not just a celebration for him and his consort, but for the entire country. Everyone, from the highest officials in the palace to the people who plowed the fields, could celebrate with them.

The day Will and Hannibal were married was declared a national holiday. No one, except those whose jobs were deemed essential, would work. Instead, they could attend the hundreds of parties held in every corner of the country where food and drink would be served.

In the capital, the streets were decorated with the flags of the empire and the House of Lecter imperial crest: a black feathered stag with a crown between its antlers.

Will felt a little dizzy in the golden carriage. The cheering crowds made him nervous, but Hannibal's hand immediately calmed him down. This wasn't even the worst part. The carriage they rode towards the chapel where they would marry was closed. The road back to the palace after the wedding would be in an open carriage because by then, Will would no longer be just Will Graham, he would be the Prince Consort of the Empire and had to show himself to his people.

Will managed to zone out for much of the ceremony. Thousands of people were watching. It was too much for him to handle. The last thing he needed was to have a panic attack at his wedding. Instead, he focused on Hannibal’s presence at his side and stared at the mosaic of a skeleton beneath their feet. He only came back to reality the moment he officially became Hannibal’s husband, until death did them part, and that would be the case because no one else could have Hannibal. Will would not allow it. The look in Hannibal’s eyes let him know he felt the same way.

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Even though all Will did on the way to the palace for the wedding banquet was smile and wave at people, he felt exhausted. But of course, he couldn't miss the banquet his husband planned to perfection. Husband. Will smiled to himself. Hannibal was his husband at last. Just a couple more hours and they could retire to their room. The excitement for what would happen that night far outweighed the nerves.

"May I ask why are you smiling so much, dear?" Hannibal asked in his ear, his tone playful. Will shivered.

“I was just thinking about what happens later tonight,” Will replied quietly, his tone equally playful.

He could have sworn that the reddish glow in Hannibal's eyes suddenly intensified.

I want him, Will thought, *and he wants me too.*

“Just a couple more hours, my love,” Hannibal assured him. “We'll talk to the guests a bit and then we can leave.

“Do I have to talk to them?” Will complained.

"I'm afraid so, but only for a little while," Hannibal promised. "It would be very rude of us not to."

Will sighed. Their table was on a raised platform and on either side of them, at lower tables, were their relatives and honored guests. His father and Alana seemed comfortable talking with whoever approached them. They were quickly getting used to this life among nobles. It would be useful for Alana. If things went their way, she would soon be engaged to Lady Margot Verger. Will liked Margot but couldn't say the same about her brother, Lord Mason. What an unpleasant fellow. Everything about him was odd, even his clothing choices. Always eccentric. Will wondered if he didn't have mirrors in his mansion or if his servants were so afraid of him that they didn't dare tell him he looked ridiculous. When he met him, Will couldn't help but ask him if he had just escaped from a circus. Will didn't win Mason Verger's friendship with that comment but he didn't want it in the first place either, so it didn’t matter.

On the other side, next to Hannibal, was the Lady Mother and Princess Mischa, or just Mischa, as she had asked him to call her now that they were officially family. Hannibal's uncle, Lord Robert, and his wife, Lady Murasaki, a beautiful noblewoman from the eastern lands were also present. When the revolution broke out in Boreas, Lord Robert was far away from the country with his wife, which probably saved him from sharing the same fate as his older brother. Chiyoh, Hannibal's faithful attendant, had first been Lady Murasaki's protégé, but had developed a sibling bond with Hannibal and Mischa and decided to stay in Boreas. Jack Crawford and his wife Lady Phyllis, whom everyone called "Lady Bella" because of her beauty, were there too. The rest were diplomats and nobles Will didn't know. Beyond them stood Bedelia, drinking what must have been her thousandth glass of wine.

"She better not make a scene," Will said to no one in particular.

"What are you talking about, Will?" Hannibal asked him.

"Bedelia," he answered, "is getting drunker and drunker."

“Ignore her, my love,” Hannibal said. “If she makes a spectacle of herself here, I’ll send her to the dungeons until she sobers up.”

Will had to admit that he liked the image of Bedelia in the dungeon. He hoped she would try to make a fuss so they would lock her up and then throw the key into the river.

“Come on, Will,” Hannibal said as he stood up. “It’s time to greet our guests.”

Will sighed but accepted Hannibal's proffered hand. Most of the courtiers came forward to congratulate them on their marriage. After a while he and Hannibal separated, forcing Will to fend for himself.

“So you are the new prince consort,” someone said behind Will.

Turning around, Will saw a man he didn’t know. He was attractive, with brown hair, and blue eyes. And he was tall. Taller than Hannibal, even.

“That’s right,” Will told him. “And you are…?”

“Prince Antony, of House Dimmond,” the man replied, bowing. Will was still not used to people doing that to him. “At your service, Your Highness.”

They had just met, but Will knew that name well. Antony was a minor prince from the small kingdom of Prairial. As an Omega and a Prince, he had been considered a suitable consort for Hannibal, and his family had offered his hand to the Emperor even though his engagement to Will had already been announced.

"I must congratulate you, Your Highness," Antony continued. "You have made an excellent match, especially for someone of your… class."

"My class?" Will repeated in an angry tone.

Antony seemed taken aback at his tone. He obviously was not used to being spoken to in that way.

“I apologize if I offended you, Your Highness,” he apologized. “What I meant was that you come from a humble family. No one would have imagined the emperor would marry someone from a lower class. Everyone expected him to find a princess or prince of good lineage. Like me.”

It was a good thing Hannibal showed up when he did because, at this rate, it would be Will and not Bedelia making a scene. What was wrong with this idiot?

“Will, my love, there you are,” Hannibal said, wrapping his arm around Will’s shoulders.

"Your Majesty," Antony greeted, his bow much deeper than the one he had given Will. "I was just congratulating your august consort on your recent wedding. I am so happy to be able to congratulate you as well."

“Thank you very much, Prince Antony,” Hannibal thanked. “I hope you are enjoying the banquet. If you will excuse me, my husband and I are about to retire.”

Finally, Will thought.

"I'm enjoying it, yes," Antony said before they could leave, "but not as much as you will tonight, Your Majesty. It's a pity this is not 'that' kind of party."

If Hannibal hadn't pulled him close, Will could have thrown himself at Antony to scratch his eyes out. Hannibal sent Antony a tight smile and pulled Will out of there.

“I can't believe that man!” Will exclaimed once they were out of the main hall. “How dares he to say such a thing in front of me?”

"The prince has a reputation for being a flirt," Hannibal replied, "but he's harmless. Don’t listen to him."

"I want to beat him up," Will said. "Maybe that will show him not to flirt with married people."

“Dear Will, you cannot physically attack a foreign prince,” Hannibal informed him, amused. “It would be a diplomatic disaster.”

"What if he weren’t a prince?" Will asked. “I could teach him a lesson, then?"

"You could," Hannibal replied with a big smile, "but it's not a good idea for the Prince Consort to go around beating people up."

Will snorted. He was so distracted that he didn't realize they had reached Hannibal's room.

“Ah, my Will. You are like a mongoose,” Hannibal said, closing the door behind them.

“Why a mongoose?” Will asked, a little confused. Excitement and anxiety were swirling in his stomach.

“The mongoose is a small, harmless-looking animal,” Hannibal explained, “but it’s capable of taking down larger prey and is immune to the king cobra’s venom.”

“I am not small and harmless,” Will muttered.

“Is that the part of the explanation that matters most to you?” Hannibal laughed. “I said it *looks* harmless, not that it *was* harmless. And about being small… Well, you are a little short.”

“Not that much,” Will huffed, a little indignant. “You’re only about two inches taller than me.”

“The perfect height to hold you in my arms,” Hannibal said, running his hand through Will’s curls. “Everything about you is perfect to me.”

Will couldn't take it anymore and closed the distance between them. They were pressed together but he still felt they weren't close enough. He buried his nose in Hannibal's neck. Hannibal's scent always soothed him, but tonight, the spicier notes of Hannibal's Alpha scent were stronger than ever. Desire. He imagined Hannibal could smell Will's desire, too.

They kissed. This kiss was the most intense they had shared so far. As they began to shed their clothes, Will's anxiety returned. At his age, he had never done this. When Will was engaged to Matthew, Matthew always asked him to go beyond kissing. He asked Will to let

him touch him, at least over his clothes but Will never let him. He always knew that they would never get married and if people found out that he had been "dishonored," his family, already in a precarious position, would become pariahs. His poor father would end up dying of shame. He didn't refuse only because of what others would say, but also because he didn't feel that kind of desire for Matthew Brown. No, he had only felt that desire for Hannibal, who never asked him to do things he didn't want to do, who had married Will and made him a prince.

"Don't be afraid, Will," Hannibal said gently. "I'll make you feel good, I promise."

Will hadn't realized he was shaking slightly.

"I know you will," Will replied firmly. "I love you."

"I love you too, Will. Like I've never loved anyone before," Hannibal declared, wrapping his arms around him and burying his face between Will's neck and shoulder, where he would soon leave his mark. "My Will, my prince, my Omega."

"My Alpha," Will said. It was practically a moan.

Hannibal would mark him tonight, and Will would leave a twin mark on Hannibal's neck. A mark that would never fade. With that mark, it would be clear to everyone that Hannibal was his, not Bedelia's, who as a Beta could not be marked, nor Antony's or anyone else's. Only his.

Forever.

Chapter Eleven

“Your Majesty? Are you listening to me?”Jack's voice brought Hannibal out of his thoughts.

“Sorry, Jack,” Hannibal said. “I was… distracted.”

How could he not be? Since their wedding night, Will hadn't wanted to stop. They didn't get out of bed for three days, and when they did, it was only because Hannibal had duties to fulfill. But since then, they'd had sex even outside the bedroom. They had done it in the music room, the library, one of the meeting rooms, the garden at night when there weren't people out walking, and even in Hannibal's study, right on the couch Jack had just sat on. Hannibal was tempted to tell him that, just to see what Jack would do, but decided against it. He didn't want to traumatize the man for life.

The Emperor caressed the mark his new consort had left on him. The indelible mark that would bind him to Will forever. Hannibal would take Will anywhere his eager Omega asked him to, even if it was in the throne room, in front of the entire assembled court. But Will was very jealous and would not take kindly to other people seeing his Alpha in such an intimate moment, which was good because Hannibal would kill anyone who laid eyes on Will in such a vulnerable state. That was for Hannibal's eyes only.

“Your Majesty, I beg you,” Jack sounded annoyed.

“I'm sorry, Jack,” Hannibal apologized, not actually sorry. “I promise I’m listening to you now.”

"I was saying that I'm not sure your meeting with Mason is a good idea," Jack repeated. "He likes to cause trouble, but he's been calm lately, and if you bring up the subject of a marriage between Lady Margot and Miss Bloom, I'm afraid you'll be stirring up a hornet's nest."

“Honestly, Jack, I think Mason's sudden calm is rather worrying,” Hannibal told him. “It feels like the calm before the storm. I fear he plans to use his influence and resources to support our enemies.”

“Your Majesty, that is a serious accusation,” Jack warned.

“I know. That's why this meeting isn't just about discussing a possible engagement. I'll try to find out what Mason's true intentions are.”

“I hope you don't take what I'm about to say the wrong way, Sire,” Jack said cautiously, “but your consort is worsening the relationship between the crown and Lord Mason.”

“What do you mean?” Hannibal asked, frowning.

“His Imperial Highness once called Lord Mason a clown,” Jack answered with his long-suffering
voice.

“Will didn't call him a clown,” Hannibal replied. “He just asked him if he had escaped from a circus.”

“It's the same thing!”Jack exclaimed. “If he came from a circus it's because he's a clown, right?”

“He could also be a circus master,” Hannibal said, shrugging.

Jack didn’t think the comment was funny but knew he would not win this fight.

“Anyway, if Lord Mason had a difficult relationship with you before, you can be sure that it is worse now,” Jack continued, massaging his temples. “And everyone knows he is extremely controlling of his sister. Poor Lady Margot, I don't think Mason will let her go so easily”

“We'll see about that,” Hannibal said quietly.

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“Thank you for coming, Lord Mason,” Hannibal greeted when Mason entered the room.

Instead of greeting back, Mason sat opposite Hannibal at the desk, before Hannibal invited him to do so. As usual, Mason wore a most extravagant suit, which included a heavy coat with fur trim. Winter would start soon but it was not yet cold enough to warrant that kind of clothing. Hannibal felt overheated just looking at it. Mason didn’t take his hat off when he entered the study… if that feathered thing could even be called a hat.

“What do you want with me, Lord Hannibal?” Mason asked.

Hannibal gritted his teeth. Mason did the same thing every time. He called Hannibal by his old title and pretended it was just habit. In reality, he just wanted to annoy Hannibal, who never gave him the pleasure of reacting to his obvious provocation.

"Your Majesty," Hannibal corrected him in a calm voice.

“Yes, that,” Mason said, rolling his eyes. Disrespectful. “Your Majesty.”

“I'm sure your sister, Lady Margot, has told you about Miss Alana Bloom,” Hannibal said. “Margot is very interested in courting Alana officially. She intends to marry her eventually.”

“Yes, she told me about this Alana,” Mason said, tilting his chair back. Hannibal wished he would fall over. “I hope you didn't give my sister any hope. As a good older brother, I must look out for her well-being. And of course, I can't allow her to marry some random Omega.”

“I ask you to speak of Miss Bloom with respect,” Hannibal said calmly, but with a cold voice. “She is my consort's cousin and therefore also my relative.”

“Still, she's not of our kind,” Mason replied. “Margot can find a much more advantageous match.”

“Like a member of the royal house of Notus?” Hannibal asked him. “Is that why there is so much communication between you and the king, Mason?”

Mason immediately stopped playing with the chair.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” he said.

“No? Then you did not host an ambassador from Notus at your home a few weeks ago? Do you not receive correspondence bearing the royal seal of Notus continually? Do not try to deny it. I know everything. You have not been as discreet as you think, Lord Mason.”

“You are nothing but an upstart, Hannibal,” Mason snapped, standing abruptly. “You declared yourself emperor when you had no right to do so. You should have left someone more capable to take power.”

“Someone more capable?” Hannibal asked, raising an eyebrow. “Who do you mean? You? Don’t make me laugh, Mason. I stood up to the Republican government instead of hiding in my mansion like you did, waiting for the danger to pass. Besides,” he continued, “you are not of royal blood either. The entire royal family of Boreas was killed.”

“One of my ancestors belonged to the royal house of Notus,” Mason declared.

“That was almost three hundred years ago,” Hannibal replied, “I’m familiar with your house’s history.”

“That's still more royal blood than you have,” Mason snapped. “The Lecters never went above the rank of count, and your mother's house has only had Dukes.”

“You can complain all you want, Mason,” Hannibal said, standing up. “I'm the emperor, not you.”

“For now,” Mason said.

“What do you mean by that?” Hannibal asked, narrowing his eyes.

“I’m just saying, Your Majesty,” Mason pronounced his title mockingly, “that a royal house fell before, who’s to say an imperial house won’t fall next?”

After that ominous statement, Mason turned around and left the study.

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“Are you sure it’s not enough to arrest him?” Chiyoh asked, pacing around the study, her scent giving away her concern.

“Hosting and corresponding with an ambassador is not illegal,” Hannibal answered from his desk. “It is strange, no doubt, but nothing in the letters would justify an arrest. They have been careful not to incriminate themselves.

“It's obvious that he's planning something and King Francis supports him,” Chiyoh said confidently.

King Francis of House Dolarhyde ruled the kingdom of Notus, south of Boreas. He was nicknamed “The Great Red Dragon,” and his taste for violence was well known. Hannibal, who had been exiled to Notus with his family for a time knew well what the King was capable of. Although Hannibal had had problems with all the kings and queens of the continent, Francis was the worst. The king argued that Hannibal’s kingdom was not legitimate because he was not born into a royal or imperial house. It was the same complaint the other kingdoms had, but at least they were willing to talk, something Francis refused to do. He refused to receive any ambassador sent by Hannibal or sign a peace treaty.

Hannibal knew Francis entertained the idea of turning Boreas into a satellite state of his kingdom, with a puppet king or queen of his choosing, with the pretext that he was restoring order to the continent. Perhaps Francis had already found the perfect puppet, but neither he nor Mason were stupid enough to write that in a letter that could easily be intercepted.

“I'm afraid so,” Hannibal agreed. “But an accusation of high treason without any conclusive proof… Mason can say that his relationship with the king and the ambassador is personal. How can I prove otherwise? I would look like a paranoid tyrant and Mason would receive sympathy.”

During the Republican government, it was too easy to be declared a traitor. Even if you were not an active participant in the opposition, if the Republicans thought you were too indifferent or not enthusiastic enough about the revolution, you could earn yourself a one-way trip to the gallows.

It had been a bloody and terrifying time that was still fresh in the collective memory of the survivors. No, arresting Mason without solid evidence was a bad idea. If people thought Hannibal was about to begin his own reign of terror, things would get out of hand quickly.

“I don't like this at all,” Chiyoh said, sitting on the couch.

"That makes two of us," Hannibal whispered.

The silence they fell into was only interrupted by the rhythmic tapping of Chiyoh's boot against the floor. She was worried and Hannibal couldn’t blame her. A war could start at any moment and one of the conspirators seemed to be right under their noses, but they could not prove it. Chiyoh had done a great job of gathering evidence of the communication between Mason and Notus, but at the end of the day, it was not enough.

Hannibal had been working harder than ever since his disastrous meeting with Mason, drafting letters and arranging meetings with generals, planning strategies in case of invasion. He hadn't seen his mother and sister in days. His only solace was Will, who waited for him every night in his room. Their room. As was the tradition among royalty and nobility, Will had a room of his own, but he never used it because he insisted on staying with Hannibal, and Hannibal was more than happy to sleep every night with Will in his arms.

He sighed. Will, his mother, and his sister depended on him. He had to protect them. He didn't want to think about what would happen to them if war broke out and Francis Dolarhyde was victorious.

He was so distracted that the knock on the door almost made him jump out of his skin.

“Your Majesty?” it was Jack's voice.

“Come in, Jack,” Hannibal called.

Jack entered the study. His expression was one of boredom, not concern. He wasn’t there to deliver good news, but he didn't come to report anything critical issue either.

“Sire," Jack said. “I have received a complaint from Duchess Bedelia again.”

“What now?” Hannibal asked, irritated. Lately, it seemed Bedelia was intent on making Hannibal's life miserable. “Does she need another hundred pairs of shoes? Did one of her servants break a plate and now she wants to replace the entire staff? Give her whatever she asks for and tell her to leave me alone."

"What she wants is an increase in her pension," Jack answered. He, too, was fed up with Bedelia's nonsense.

“Again? No, that’s enough,” Hannibal said, shaking his head. “A war could break out at any moment. If I have to spend money, it will be on weapons, not Bedelia's frivolities.”

“Then I beg you to make it very clear to the duchess,” Jack said. “I've already explained it to her, but she doesn't want to understand. She keeps sending letters and sometimes even sends merchants to the palace to collect payment for what she buys from them.”

“She’s crossing the line,” Hannibal said, standing up from his desk. “Chiyoh, we'll talk later. Jack, have a carriage prepared for me. I'm going to Corus to settle this matter with Bedelia once and for all.”

“Yes, your majesty,” Jack said, bowing before leaving the study.

Hannibal went straight to his private apartments to change his clothes. He probably wouldn't be back until after dinner or later. He knew how stubborn Bedelia could be. He entered the antechamber trying to make as little noise as possible in case Will was asleep. Will had been feeling ill for the past few days and spent a lot of time sleeping. This was another thing that worried Hannibal. If Will did not feel better by tomorrow, Hannibal would send for Doctor Sutcliffe, whether Will wanted it or not.

“Hannibal?” Will stood in the doorway of the bedroom, hair disheveled. He looked tired.

“Will, darling, did I wake you?” Hannibal asked as he approached him. “How are you feeling today?”

"I feel sick again,” Will answered. “I threw up my breakfast and I'm tired.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to see Dr. Sutcliffe?” Hannibal was getting even more worried. Instead of getting better Will seemed to be getting worse.

“No need, it’ll pass soon,” Will said, making a dismissive gesture with his hand. “Are you going out?”

“Yes,” Hannibal said, wrapping his arms around Will. “I'm going to Corus, to Bedelia's house.”

He felt Will tense in his arms but before he had time to react or ask any questions, Will pushed Hannibal away.

“Will?” Hannibal asked, confused. Will had never done something like that before.

“Why are you going to see Bedelia?” Will spat. He was suddenly furious.

“I have to settle some matters with her,” Hannibal explained. “She is demanding more and more money and I can't allow that.”

Will didn't find that answer satisfactory.

“And why are you going personally? Why don't you send Jack?”

“She refuses to listen to Jack, it has to be me.”

Hannibal did not understand what was going on. He knew that Omegas could be very territorial and that Will was jealous of Bedelia. He hated that she and Hannibal had been married for ten years. It didn’t matter how many times Hannibal told him that he had never loved anyone the way he loved him. But this was the first time Will had acted this way.

“Is that it or do you just want to see her?” Will asked, crossing his arms.

“But… why would I want to see Bedelia if it wasn't for something important?

“I don't know. Do you miss her?”

“Of course not, Will!” Hannibal exclaimed. “What's wrong with you?”

Then the last thing Hannibal expected to happen happened. Will suddenly burst into tears. He turned on his heels and walked back into the room, slamming the door behind him. Hannibal’s confusion turned to panic. He followed Will into the room and found him still crying on the bed, in the middle of the… nest? That hadn’t been there when he left for work earlier.

“Will, my love,” Hannibal said gently, approaching slowly. He didn't want to scare him with sudden movements. “Tell me what's wrong. Tell me and I'll fix it for you.”

To his relief, Will didn't pull away from him and accepted his hug.

“I'm sorry, “ Will apologized, his voice was shaky and he had tears in his eyes. “I don't know what's wrong with me. I woke up dizzy. I threw up and I'm hungry but thinking about food makes me want to throw up again. And I'm still tired even though I slept a lot.”

The symptoms, the nest, the sudden mood swings… Hannibal sniffed Will’s neck. He had noticed the change in his scent but attributed it to illness. But now he realized it wasn’t a sickly sweet scent, but rather pleasantly sweet. Hannibal’s eyes filled with tears of excitement.

“I'm sorry, Will,” Hannibal said. “I've been so busy. I didn't notice.”

“You didn't notice what?” Will asked. Now he was the one getting worried.

“I think… No, I’m sure. We’re going to have a child,” Hannibal didn’t even try to hold back his tears. Those were tears of joy.

Understanding finally dawned on Will. It had been so obvious, but neither of them had noticed.

“I'm an idiot,” Will giggled. He was crying too, but this time he was happy.

“You've made me the happiest man in the world, Will,” Hannibal declared. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Will answered.

And then:

“Do you really have to go to Bedelia’s house? Stay here with me, Hannibal. Please.”

When Will asked him for things like that, looking at him through his eyelashes with those beautiful eyes... Hannibal couldn’t refuse.

“Of course I'll stay, Will. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else.”

Chapter Twelve

The palace gardens were as beautiful as ever. Will couldn't wait for his baby to be born so they could walk around together. He was only six weeks along, so there was still a long way to go.

Ever since he found out they would have a son and heir, Hannibal had become very protective—well, more protective than usual. He didn't want to be separated from Will and their unborn child even for a minute, but state affairs didn't allow him to be with them all day like he wanted, so he had assigned Alpha Beverly Katz as Will's guard.

At first, he didn't like having someone standing behind him all the time but he grew to like Beverly. Sometimes they would talk, and Beverly knew how to hide her presence without losing sight of him when Will wanted to spend some time alone with his thoughts.

Today was one of those days when he needed to think. He knew that Hannibal was downplaying the situation in the country because he didn't want to scare him, but Will knew that things were not going well. He had heard that Mason Verger managed to flee from Boreas undetected. He had surely gone to meet with King Francis, and that spelled trouble for them.

Will suddenly felt exhausted. He sat down on a bench in the garden under the shade of a tree. A war could break out at any moment. If it did, Hannibal would lead the troops. So many things could happen during a war. There were muskets, cannonballs, bayonets, diseases capable of wiping out entire regiments… Will tried to calm himself by breathing in and out. He should not think about things like that.

"It seems the rumors are true," said a voice Will hadn't heard in a while. "You managed to marry an emperor, Will."

For a moment he thought he had fallen asleep on the bench. It wouldn't be the first time Will had done so in strange places. But no. Matthew Brown, his ex-fiancé, was standing before him.

"What are you doing here, Matthew?" Will asked without saying hello, with a voice that made it clear he wished he was talking to anyone other than Matthew.

"Where are your manners, Will? Did your new position as consort go to your head so quickly?" Matthew asked, moving a little closer to him.

Will glared at him. Because of things like this, Will knew a marriage between them would not work. He hadn't let his new position go to his head. He had always been like that. If he had ever acted like a calm, well-mannered Omega to Matthew it was because his father trusted him to save the family from financial ruin. It had been a disguise and Matthew didn't see it. Hannibal did.

"Just tell me what you want," Will snapped.

“You see,” Matthew said. “These past few months I've been away from home. I joined the Kingdom of Notus’ International Legion. When I returned to Zephyr, I was greeted with the news that Will Graham had become Prince Consort of Boreas. I thought it was a mix-up with some other Will Graham, but it was not. Who knew you'd make it this far?”

Will felt Matthew's lecherous gaze all over him. He unfortunately hadn't lost that habit from when they were engaged.

“How’s your Omega?” Will asked, hoping that would make Matthew feel guilty. Will didn’t remember the Omegas’ name but hoped the young man was okay.

“He’s okay, I guess,” Matthew answered, shrugging. “He hasn't given me any children yet, which is disappointing. You would have given me plenty of pups by now.”

Will remained silent.

“So how did you do it?” Matthew asked.

“How did I do what?”

“How did you get the Emperor to marry you,” Matthew clarified. “I mean, he was supposed to be looking for a high-class consort, and you… don't fit the profile.”

“That's none of your business,” Will was getting pissed.

“Don't be like that, Will,” Matthew said. “I'm just curious. Come on, tell me. Did you let him take you to bed? You must have been amazing, he even decided to keep you…”

Will jumped to his feet.

“Have you gone insane, Matthew?” Will snapped. “I could have your tongue removed for saying something like that.”

“Calm down,” Matthew asked in a tone that was meant to be reassuring but only made Will even angrier. “I was just joking.”

“Jokes are supposed to be funny,” Will muttered, turning his back to Matthew. He headed towards the palace, he needed a long nap after that conversation.

Matthew grabbed his wrist.

“Let go of me, Matthew,” Will ordered.

“Will—”

Beverly had an uncanny knack for appearing out of nowhere when she was needed, like now, when she managed to pull Matthew away from Will and stand between them.

“Get away from him,” Beverly growled.

“I was just talking to Will—" Matthew began.

“His Highness,” she interrupted, emphasizing the title, “does not want to talk to you. Go away.”

“Have some respect, woman,” Matthew snapped. “I'm here with a delegation from Notus, so you better—”

Beverly shut Matthew up with a punch to the jaw.

“There's your respect,” Beverly said. “Come on, Your Highness.”

Will returned to the palace with Beverly but not before throwing a look back at Matthew. He stood there, stunned, with a hand holding his jaw, watching them walk away.

“Beverly, do you think that was a good idea?” asked Will. “If he really is with a delegation here…”

“That delegation has more important things to worry about, Your Highness,” Beverly answered.

Will stopped halfway down a hall.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Your Highness, perhaps you should ask the Emperor—”

“I'm asking you.”

Beverly seemed to be debating with herself whether to tell him what she knew or not. She finally made her decision.

“Your Highness, that delegation is here because King Francis has formally declared war.”

*****

Will was drinking tea in his private parlor. He had just returned from the Lady Mother's apartments, where he had gone as soon as he heard that a war was about to begin. Mischa had been there too. The two of them had done their best to reassure him, though Will knew they were afraid too. He wondered if Hannibal would return that night. He needed to see him.

“Your Highness?” Beverly stood at the door. “Your cousin, Miss Bloom, is here to see you.”

“Tell her to come in, Beverly.”

“Right away.”

The start of a war wasn’t the only revelation of the day. Mason was indeed in Notus, having become a general for Francis Dolarhyde. That wasn’t the part that surprised Will, but the fact that the Committee of Safety had decided to put Margot Verger under house arrest while they

investigated her to make sure she wasn't conspiring with her brother. He figured Alana was here to talk about that.

"Your Highness," Alana greeted as she entered, curtsying.

She had always been proper, even in moments like these when it was obvious she wasn't feeling well.

"You don't have to do that, Alana," Will told her. "Come sit with me."

Alana did. She was pale and it was obvious that she had been crying.

"I see you already found out," Will said.

"Yes," Alana said. "Uncle Bill went to visit Margot with me, but when we arrived we were not allowed in."

"They think Margot may be involved in her brother's betrayal," Will commented.

"She is not!" Alana exclaimed. Her eyes filled with tears. "Will, Mason, he… He is very cruel to Margot. He hits her if she disobeys him and locks her in her room. She is afraid of him. If she did anything it was because he forced her, I am sure of that."

Will was disgusted but not surprised.

"I don't think Margot is a traitor either," he said, taking Alana's hand. "It will only be for a while and then she will be released."

"Could you talk to the emperor?" Alana asked, her voice shaking. "Tell him that Margot is innocent. I know she did nothing wrong."

"I will, Alana," Will promised. "Margot will be fine."

Unless Francis and Mason win this war, Will thought.

If that happened, none of them would be fine.

****

Hannibal returned to his room after midnight. Will had never seen him so tired.

"You should be sleeping," Hannibal told him when he saw Will sitting up in bed. The candles were still lit.

"I know, but I can't sleep," he answered.

Hannibal sat next to him on the bed and hugged him. His scent calmed him down a little.

"What's going to happen now?" Will asked quietly.

“Jack and I are preparing the troops and formalizing alliances,” answered Hannibal. “When everything is ready, we will head south. To battle.”

Will knew this would happen, but hearing it from Hannibal made it more real than ever. He had never been particularly sentimental, but the baby inside him made him very sensitive. He couldn't help but cry.

“I will do everything I can to get back to you and our child, Will,” Hannibal tried to reassure him, hugging him tighter.

“I know you'll do everything in your power to come back to us,” Will said. “But in a war, a lot of things can happen. Things you can't control.”

Hannibal didn't answer. What could he say? It was the truth.

“I'm afraid you won't be here to meet our child,” Will whispered. Wars could last for many years.

“I'm sorry, Will,” Hannibal apologized. His voice let Will know Hannibal was sad about that too.

“You don't have to apologize,” Will said, wiping away his tears. “You're doing your duty.”

They stayed silent, just enjoying the contact between them. Will was always tired these days, but nerves kept him from sleeping and he had decided to wait up for Hannibal. Now that he was in his arms, he thought he could finally sleep.

“Will, if I don't return…” Hannibal began.

These words fell upon him like cold water. Any trace of sleepiness disappeared.

“Don't say that,” Will begged, crying again.

“It’s a possibility,” Hannibal said. “Listen to me, Will. If I’m captured or die, you must flee as soon as you receive the news. Francis will want to get rid of our child, but Zephyr has allied with us and they have agreed to take you and the rest of the family in if anything happens to me.”

Will's crying got worse. He cried because Hannibal might die far from home and his family. He cried because his child might never know his father and live in fear that the Dragon would get him. He cried for his father and Alana. Without Hannibal, their protector, they would lose everything again. But most of all, he cried for himself. Just a couple of weeks ago he was so happy and now… now everything was falling apart.

“That's the worst-case scenario,” Hannibal said, stroking his curls in an attempt to calm Will down. “None of that may be necessary, Will. The kingdoms of Notus and Auster are allies, but Zephyr and Eurus have allied themselves with us. Several minor kingdoms and principalities are about to do so as well, fearing that Francis will come after them next. I can't promise we'll be victorious, but we have an advantage. We need to have faith.”

It was all Will could do. He needed to have faith.

*****

Will was in Hannibal's study. He and Jack were going over maps and possible strategies. Hannibal hadn't wanted Will to come with him because he didn't want to worry him and the baby, but Will wanted to spend as much time as he could around Hannibal. He didn't know when he would see him again. Or if he would see him again… Will shook his head. He didn't want to even think about that. Instead, he focused on what Jack was saying.

"…if we manage to surround the combined army of Notus and Auster…" he heard Jack say.

He and Hannibal were looking at the map on the desk. Will stood up from the couch and walked over. Both kingdoms were south of Boreas. Notus' capital, Skiron, was the southernmost city on the continent. Auster's capital, Lipis, was much farther north.

"Don't you think it would be a better idea to take on one army at a time, Jack?" Will asked, his eyes still on the map.

"What do you mean, Your Highness?" asked Jack, looking doubtful.

"I reckon King Francis' forces are still concentrated in the capital," Will explained. "The same goes for Auster's forces in Lipis. Those two cities are very far from each other. Even if King Francis mobilized his troops today, it would take a long time for him to join his allies."

"That's true," Jack agreed. "We're closer to Lipis than Francis in Skiron, but it's still going to be a long journey. Who knows if we'll get there in time?"

"Unless we live off the land," Hannibal commented, thoughtful.

"Live off the land?" Jack asked.

"Thanks to our allies, our army far exceeds Francis's," Hannibal continued. "We could divide into army corps, march as fast as possible, and live off the land we travel so we don't have to depend too much on supply wagons slowing down our march."

Jack thought about it for a while.

"The kingdom of Notus is not known for having fertile lands or abundant crops," Jack said. "Most of their trade is based on fishing and timber, so living off the land will be impossible for them. His Imperial Highness was right when he said it would take Francis a long time to meet with his allies. He will practically have to travel the length of the country and then much of Auster to do so. The supply wagons will delay them even more."

"It's decided, then," Hannibal said, standing up from his desk. "Jack, inform the generals of our plan. We must leave soon."

"Yes, Sire. Your Highness," Jack bowed to both of them before leaving.

" I think Jack sees you in a different light now," Hannibal said once they were alone.

Will couldn't help but laugh a little.

“He’s right when he says I'm rude,” he said, “but that doesn't make me an idiot.”

“Of course not,” Hannibal told him, wrapping an arm around Will’s shoulders. “But tell me, do you know about battle strategy? Why didn't you tell me?”

“When we still didn't know if I would be Alpha, Beta, or Omega, my father seriously considered sending me to the army,” Will explained. “It would be a good way to get money and if I performed well, I could get high positions and earn my fortune. Becoming a general would have opened doors that had been closed when my father lost everything, so he hired tutors to teach me math, geography, some military strategy…”

“Until you reached puberty and turned out to be an Omega,” Hannibal guessed.

“Yes. My father's hopes of having a general for a son died that day.”

To this day, no army on the continent accepted male or female Omegas, though Will had heard stories of Omegas who had hidden their scent and passed themselves off as Betas, fighting valiantly without being discovered. He had also heard stories of Omegas who were discovered when they unexpectedly went into heat or even gave birth at the camps.

He remembered something all of a sudden.

“Hannibal,” Will said in a serious voice.

"What's wrong?" Hannibal asked, a little worried by Will’s sudden seriousness.

“You say Jack sees me in a different light now Does that mean he's over the whole Winston incident?” He didn't know why, but Will needed to know that.

The change of subject was so abrupt that Hannibal couldn't help but laugh. It was a laugh so contagious that Will started laughing too. Will hadn't realized how much he missed Hannibal's laughter.

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for making you wait a couple of days for this chapter, but I had a subconjunctival hemorrhage (a blood vessel broke in my eye for some reason) and I was told to rest my eyes for a few days. But I'm back now, yay.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirteen

Hannibal's coat had done little to protect him from the relentless rain. Neither he nor his troops had had the chance to stop and try to light a fire to warm themselves. Hannibal had not left his horse in hours. They had to make the most of the remaining daylight hours to advance as much as possible. So far, the army of Boreas and the troops sent to him by his allies had moved with incredible speed, using the available resources of the allied towns they passed through rather than relying on the supply wagons at the rear.

It was a good strategy, as the Red Dragon forces had still not joined his allies at Auster. At that point, they must still have been weeks away. Hannibal and his generals managed to take them by surprise, and the defeat was total. The king had no choice but to surrender and accept a peace treaty. Still, a good-sized garrison temporarily occupied the city of Lipis.

Hannibal was sure that the news had already reached the Dragon. The idea had arisen among the generals that Francis would stop the war when he was left without allies, but Hannibal knew that this would not happen. Several skirmishes between them and some isolated troops of the army of Notus took place in the following weeks, killing any hope of a fast victory.

The torrential rain had eased, giving way to a light breeze, and it was getting darker. They would be able to set up camp soon. From there, Hannibal would send letters home to reassure his family that he was fine. He would not mention he was shot in the foot during a skirmish. Other than that he was unharmed. He simply didn’t want to alarm anyone, especially not Will.

Will… If he was doing the math right, he should be six months pregnant by now and Hannibal wasn’t there when he needed him the most. Things seemed to be going well, but in war, one never knew. Things could change at any moment. A certain victory turned into a devastating defeat. Before he left, Hannibal had made all kinds of arrangements to ensure that his family, especially Will and their child, would be safe and well cared for if he died or was captured. Chiyoh had stayed behind, though she had refused to do so at first, wanting to help Hannibal in battle. She would certainly have been a great help, but there was no one else Hannibal trusted more with such an important task.

If Hannibal was defeated, there was no doubt that Francis Dolarhyde would advance towards Boreas' capital and take the entire imperial family as prisoners. The Great Red Dragon was not exactly known for being a merciful man. He would most likely want to get rid of anyone who might have a claim to the throne and might challenge his puppet king. That was why everyone had to flee as soon as news of his defeat reached them. First, they had to go to Zephyr, where they would receive temporary asylum. The next part of the plan he had not even told Will. Hannibal had maintained a secret correspondence with his uncle and aunt, Robert and Lady Murasaki, using a special code so that they would not be discovered even if the letters were intercepted. Zephyr had allied themselves with them, surely they would also receive the wrath of the Dragon as soon as he was done with Boreas so his family would not be safe there for long. Together they planned to take the entire family to the eastern kingdoms, far away from the clutches of Francis Dolarhyde.

Hannibal had never been a particularly spiritual person, but faced with the possibility of never seeing his loved ones again and leaving them in such a precarious situation, he couldn't help but pray to the gods and ask them to allow him to return home, hug his mother and sister again, kiss Will and never leave his side again, and, above all, be able to hold his child.

****

Dinner that night was a bit meager. They were entering enemy territory and said terrain was not exactly the most fertile on the continent. But they had managed to eat, that was the important thing.

Hannibal was sitting outside his tent, next to a campfire. They had set up camp a couple of hours ago and the first thing Hannibal did was write letters and send them home with a messenger. They would take a while to reach their destination and Hannibal wondered what he would be doing when those letters reached the palace.

The sound of approaching footsteps interrupted his thoughts. It was Jack, accompanied by General Chilton.

"Your Majesty," both men greeted as they bowed.

“Is something wrong?” Hannibal asked.

“An ambassador requests to speak with you, Sire,” Jack answered.

“Ambassador?” Hannibal asked, frowning.

“Yes, Sire, from Notus,” Jack confirmed.

Hannibal wondered what Francis was planning. He hadn't decided to surrender, of course not.

“Let him come in,” Hannibal ordered. “I want both of you present as well.”

“Yes, Sire,” they both said.

Jack stayed while Chilton went to find the ambassador.

“Your Majesty,” Jack said. “Could it be possible that the Dragon wants to make peace?”

“I doubt it, Jack,” Hannibal answered honestly. “I don't know what he's planning, but I do know he hasn't given up.”

They remained silent until Chilton returned.

“Your Excellency, Randall Tier,” Chilton announced.

Randall bowed to Hannibal.

“Your Majesty,” he greeted.

“It is an honor to receive you, Your Excellency,” Hannibal said. “Let us enter my tent.”

The tent was open, so the fire's light was enough to see and write or read letters. Hannibal sat down and asked Randall Tier to do the same. Jack and Frederick stood behind him.

“Do you have a message from His Majesty, King Francis?” Hannibal asked, getting straight to the point.

"That is right, Your Majesty," Randall told him. "His Majesty the King is very magnanimous and is willing to make peace with you."

Randall unrolled the scroll in his hand.

“This is King Francis' offer,” he continued. “His Majesty asks that you formally abdicate the throne of Boreas, which will pass to Mason Verger. In exchange, the king will grant you and your family safe passage to exile in the country of your choice.”

Jack and Frederick were outraged at the proposal. Hannibal was too. The worst part was that if it had been anyone else offering him this, he would have even considered it. But when it came to Francis… No, he didn't trust the Dragon or Mason. They might spare his mother and sister, but not his child. That child would be a threat to them, they wouldn't let him go so easily.

“Your Excellency,” Hannibal said after a few minutes. “I hope you know there is no way I will accept that.”

"And I hope you know that when you are defeated, you will not be granted the same mercy," Randall replied, not surprised by his refusal.

"When I am defeated?" Hannibal asked. "Is the king so sure of his victory?"

“He is,” Randall stated. “There will be troops under the command of Lord Mason Verger, who, as you know, has great military skills.”

Jack and Chilton exchanged confused glances. Hannibal had to use all his discipline not to burst out laughing. Mason? Military skills? It was true that he came from a family of a military tradition and his father had been a successful commander, but Hannibal knew well

that Mason had not followed in his footsteps. Unless he had learned everything a general learned in years of service in months. Before leaving, he had spoken to Margot, who had been released from house arrest when it was determined she was not involved with her brother's treason. He knew that their father intended for Mason to become a soldier and had hired tutors for him, but he simply was not a good student and preferred to spend his time torturing animals and harassing his sister.

“Your Excellency,” Hannibal said. “Is there any chance that His Majesty the King might agree to change some of these terms? I am willing to accept this offer, but I wish it wasn’t so harsh.

“Your Majesty…” Frederick and Jack were taken aback by this, but Hannibal silenced them with a look.

“I would accept if you would at least allow me to retain my property and live in peace with my family in Boreas,” Hannibal continued.

“I'm afraid that won't be possible, Your Majesty,” Randall answered. He didn’t even consider this proposal. “You must hand over everything and leave the kingdom.”

Hannibal feigned concern.

"I can't accept it," he said after a moment of false reflection. "Our chances of winning may be low, but I can't give up without at least fighting for that which belongs to me."

Hannibal was very grateful that Jack and General Chilton were standing behind Tier. Both looked like they were about to have a fit.

“Belongs to you?” Tier asked with a cocky smirk. “You are not of royal blood. The kingdom does not belong to you.”

“It doesn't belong to Mason either,” Hannibal replied.

“Lord Mason was not in the line of succession, it is true,” Randall Tier conceded. “But there is royal blood in his lineage, unlike yours.”

Again with that same argument. Hannibal stood up.

“In any case, I have decided that I would rather die in battle than surrender,” Hannibal declared. “Tell King Francis I do not care if his army has better generals than mine. I don’t care if it’s difficult, but I will fight to the very end.”

The ambassador stood up as well.

"It will be as you wish, Your Majesty," he said before bowing and leaving the way he came. Despite having used a title of respect, he said it in the same tone as if he had insulted Hannibal.

Once he was far enough away, Jack and Chilton almost pounced on him.

“Your Majesty, what was that?”Jack exclaimed, indignant and confused.

“Were you really thinking of giving up?” Chilton asked.

“Of course not,” Hannibal replied. “Didn't you hear? I thought it was some kind of trap, but no. The idiot really believes it. Francis believes Mason is a talented general and will put him in charge of his troops.”

"I can't believe it!" Chilton said. "Mason Verger rarely attended training, and when he did, he was on opium.

“And if we're lucky, he'll go into battle like that, too,” Hannibal said, already formulating plans. “I expect Randall to tell Francis and Mason what I just said, word for word. I know Mason. He won't pass on an opportunity to humiliate me, especially if he thinks I fear him. We must prepare reserve troops. Jack, get the maps. Chilton, go and gather the generals.”

****

The battle would take place ten kilometers from the city of Sarrasin in Notus. Hannibal and his troops had taken possession of the high hills roughly in the middle of the terrain. It was a foggy morning.

“Keep the troops ready for evacuation,” Hannibal told Frederick.

“Evacuation, Your Majesty?” Chilton asked, somewhat confused. “The altitude would give us a great advantage.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Hannibal agreed. “That is why Mason will try to take these hills. He will most likely attack our right flank to try to cut off our communication with the supply wagons. As a result, Mason's center and left flank will be exposed and therefore vulnerable. The reserve forces will attack and retake the hills. From there we will take advantage to attack the exposed troops, weaken them, and finally deliver the coup de grace.

Frederick nodded.

“So we will evacuate the hills to encourage the enemy to attack us,” Frederick said.

“That's right,” Hannibal confirmed. “If we evacuate, we'll be giving Mason the impression that we're retreating. I know him, he won't let this opportunity pass him by.”

“Your Majesty,” Jack said. He had remained silent up until now. “Do you believe the Red Dragon is present?”

“I don't know, Jack,” Hannibal answered.

Francis was a much better commander than Mason and his presence would complicate things, but Hannibal hoped he would be there. His family, especially his child, would only be safe with his and Mason's deaths.

“Get ready,” Hannibal ordered. “I'm going with Tobias to help prepare the cannons.”

“Don't you think you should rest, Sire?” asked Chilton. “The corporals can take care of the guns.”

“Before I became an emperor, I was an artillery commander. And I still am*” Hannibal replied as he headed toward the batteries.

****

Hannibal had always thought Mason was erratic and unpredictable, but when it came to commanding an army, his moves were so obvious and predictable it almost made him laugh. He took the bait and sent his troops to attack the right flank of the combined armies of Boreas and its allies, which was just what Hannibal wanted him to do.

During these movements, sunlight broke through the clouds and dissipated the mist… Hannibal's troops emerged from it and launched a general attack on the enemy forces.

It was a massacre. Thousands of people on both sides died like flies, killed by cannon fire, bullets, and saber cuts during cavalry charges. No matter how much Jack insisted, Hannibal refused to leave his post by the guns, on several occasions firing them himself and getting covered in mud. True, he narrowly escaped being shot more than once and more than one cannonball came dangerously close to him, but his troops were risking and losing their lives in his name and Hannibal simply couldn't hide while they did all the work.

By the time night fell, it was obvious that the battle was over and Hannibal was the victor.

Randall Tier, the diplomat from Notus, had no choice but to return to Hannibal with his tail tucked between his legs and surrender. There was not a shred of the confidence and arrogance he had shown a few days ago when he demanded that Hannibal surrender and hand over everything to his king.

Hannibal would later learn that Mason had been hit in the torso by a cannonball when he recklessly marched onto the battlefield. Field medics were unable to do anything for him except relieve his pain with opium until he died hours later.

Hannibal had never liked Mason, but he couldn't help but feel sorry for him. That was one of the worst ways to die.

Wagons full of supplies and weapons were confiscated, and banners and soldiers were captured as well. Among them was a certain lieutenant of the International Legion. Matthew Brown was originally from Zephyr and had joined the Legion in hopes of advancing faster there than in his own country's army. To Hannibal, Matthew was just Will's ex-fiancé, who had been very rude to him during a visit to the palace months ago. If Hannibal didn't lock him in a dungeon it was because Matthew and the rest of the delegation had already left when Hannibal found out about the disrespect committed.

Unfortunately, Francis was not on the list of those captured. Hannibal knew that the Red Dragon had fled with a small guard when it became obvious that his army had been defeated. Cavalry had been sent after him, but it was unlikely they could capture him. After a short rest

to regain strength and take care of the wounded, the army would march again to catch up with him.

Hannibal was busy in his tent, writing a report of the battle to be published in the news bulletins back in Boreas. News like this would surely boost the morale of the people and his family. As soon as he finished the report, he would throw himself into personal correspondence.

It turned out that the report would have to wait. Hannibal heard a commotion outside and then Jack's voice getting closer.

“Your Majesty!” Jack’s excited voice exclaimed.

"What is it?" Hannibal asked, pen and paper forgotten for the moment.

Before Jack could answer, Generals Frederick Chilton and Tobias Budge appeared behind him, escorting a man. From his uniform, Hannibal deduced that he was a lancer from his army.

“What’s going on?” Hannibal asked.

“Your Majesty, please come out,” Jack requested. “You have to see this.”

Hannibal did just that. A good number of officers had gathered there. Not far from his tent was a wagon covered with a wagon. Jack walked over and lifted the blanket, revealing the corpse of Francis Dolarhyde, the Great Red Dragon. Hannibal was speechless.

“Francis fled with his guard, but before that, he switched outfits with one of his men,” Jack explained. “The troops we sent managed to catch up with them and engaged in combat.”

Jack turned to the man between Frederick and Tobias.

"This brave man," Jack continued, "fought with one of the guards and killed him with his lance. Imagine his surprise when he discovered that it was not a simple guard, but the king himself."

Hannibal approached the man.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Brian Zeller,” the man replied. “From the First Cavalry Lancers Regiment, Your Majesty.”

“I have no words to show my gratitude, but believe me, you will be rewarded for your bravery,” Hannibal assured him.

And then, he turned to the other people present.

“We can go home now,” he declared.

Chapter End Notes

*This phrase is inspired by a similar one uttered by Jean Lannes, Marshal of France, during the Battle of Regensburg in 1809. Before he became a Marshal, Lannes was a Grenadier.

The battle in this chapter is loosely based on the Battle of Austerlitz, which took place on December 2nd, 1805, during the War of the Third Coalition.

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